

Emigre

#33

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No Small Issue

EDITOR AND DESIGNER: Rudy VanderLans. COPY EDITOR: Alice Polesky.  
EMIGRE FONTS: Zuzana Licko. DESIGNER AT LARGE: Gail Swanlund.  
SALES, DISTRIBUTION, AND ADMINISTRATION: Tim Starback. SALES: Linnea Mason and Tony Hardina.

Phone: (916) 451 4344 Fax: (916) 451 4351

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by Joe Clark

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SCOTT W. SANTORO, WORKSIGHT, NEW YORK CITY, NEW YORK.



Emigre No. 32



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In and Around:

Cultures of Design  
and the Design of Cultures

Part Two

By Andrew Blauvelt

For graphic design to understand its  
relationship to culture,  
we need to consider how its visual language  
operates in society;  
its locations and dispersals and how these,  
in  
turn,  
affect  
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As a spectator to the saber-rattling of recent articles arguing, in very different ways, for graphic design to understand its social consequences and function, I am led back to their usual foil: style. In this line of reasoning, "style," particularly when seen as formal experimentation, is explicitly or implicitly contrasted with "substance," usually understood as the content or message.<sup>1</sup> Of course, these oppositions of style and substance, form and content, are as old as the art versus design debate. The newness of recent arguments, however, lies in the epiphany that graphic design is a product of larger social forces and contributes to this thing called "culture." This reasoning extends the analysis beyond the substance of any particular message to examine content in the bigger picture of cultural consequences and social functions; in short, its context.

As an articulate contributor to the debate, Andrew Howard in his essay, "There is such a thing as society," notes that the concern for understanding graphic design in a larger framework of society does not "preclude an exploration of the formal representation of language."<sup>2</sup> This statement is made to counter the extent to which discussions of social and cultural context seem to situate themselves against the kind of intense visual experimentation associated with recent graphic design. In this way, issues of form are separated from issues of content while style is severed from meaning. I believe it is necessary to rejoin these artificially constructed oppositions in order to engage in a more meaningful discussion of graphic design. For graphic design to understand its relationship to culture, we need to consider how its visual language operates in society; its locations and dispersals and how these, in turn, affect meaning. We also need a better understanding of why graphic design exists in society, which requires a critical examination of the interests it serves and can serve.

With this in mind, I would like to consider a space that is opened through an understanding of the relationship between the concepts of design and culture. I wish to explore this design-culture relationship through two terms borrowed from recent work in historical studies: *circulation* and *negotiation*.<sup>3</sup> These two terms describe a relationship between design and culture in two related ways. I use the term "circulation" to speak of the traffic in visual languages, or styles, focusing on their location within particular groups and their dissemination among other social groups through forces like appropriation. Negotiation relates to the idea of the transference of visual languages or styles from one group to another, not as simply a wholesale acceptance, but as a consequence of some give and take. These forms of

1.

I subscribe to the notion that style carries meaning and is neither simply a meaningless ornament attached to nor separable from some truer, deeper, or purer structure. This dichotomy is argued by J. Abbott Miller, who makes a case for such an opposition between style and structure, in his essay *THE IDEA IS THE MACHINE*, in *Eye*, Vol.3, No.10, 1993, pp.58-65.

2.

Andrew Howard, *THERE IS SUCH A THING AS SOCIETY...*, in *Eye*, Vol.4, No.13, 1994, pp.72-77.

3.

These terms are borrowed from Steven Greenblatt. See his book *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.





[figure 1]  
From *Symbol Signs*, by The American Institute of Graphic Arts.



[figure 2]  
From *AN IRREVERANT LOOK AT LOGOTYPES AND BRANDMARKS*,  
by Jay Doblin in *STA Journal*, February 1985, p.34.



4-

The trickle-down theory of stylistic diffusion, a sort-of supply-side aestheticism, is typically attributable to certain Modernist sensibilities born out of elitism, while the trickle-up theory of stylistic diffusion is of a more recent vogue, as exemplified by the MoMA exhibition, "High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture." Corrective variants exist for this model, including Ellen Lupton's critical examination of the graphic designer's love affair with the "vernacular." See Lupton's HIGH AND LOW: A STRANGE CASE OF US AND THEM? in *Eye*, Vol.2, No.7, 1992, pp.72-77.

5-

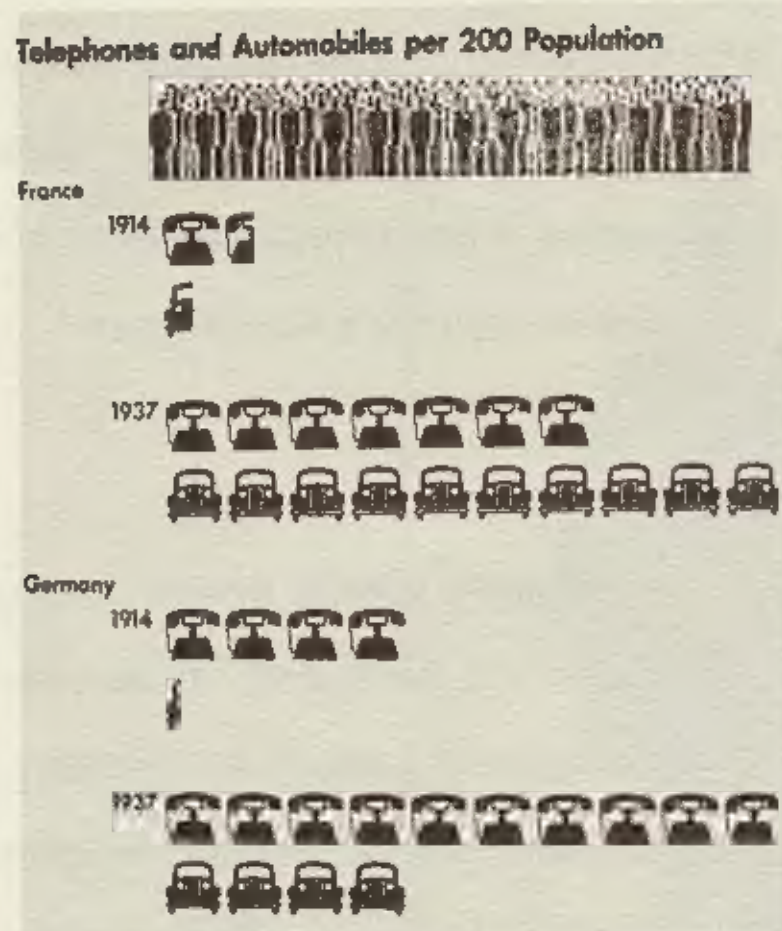
The modern drive to collapsing the boundaries between nations occurs both verbally and visually through utopian projects like developing an Esperanto, a common verbal language, or in the development of pictographic systems such as ISOTYPE. Modernist qualities of objectivity and rationality reign in Otto Neurath's ISOTYPE system, which adopts abstract, reductive forms that we now associate with signage programs meant to facilitate our movement through places like airports or the Olympic Games.

exchange should not be thought of as somehow even or balanced, because the social positions of who gives and who receives are different, thereby reflecting an unequal distribution of power. Additionally, the circulation of visual languages is not unidirectional, flowing one-way from the top down or from the bottom up, but rather, an exchange among various social strata, where they attain specific meanings and associations and generate new meanings through each transference.<sup>4</sup>

### The Traffic in Signs

The traffic in signs is the big business of professional graphic design. The high contrast marks of corporate symbols and logotypes and the ubiquity of the international signs of the pictograph are the products of this business of graphic design, signaling the way through the contemporary public sphere. Graphic design literally packages the commodities of consumer culture as it shows us the way to the bathroom [ *figure 1* ]. The corporation's identity is protected through its status as a registered trademark as it makes its way through the global marketplace asserting its uniqueness, its difference, in the face of utter homogenization — illustrating a basic premise of consumer promotion, the first principle of advertising: how to be a unique individual while being like everyone else [ *figure 2* ]. It is the particular nature of corporate culture that can speak of difference through the language of sameness. This condition of sameness should be familiar to anyone who has lived with its environmental equivalent, suburbia. Now referred to as the "Wal-Marting of America," the feelings of sameness and placelessness can now be exported on a global scale under one of the many signs of late-capitalist corporate culture. Just as an economy based on old trade routes fostered the development of colonies and colonial imperialism, the new global economy continues this process, shuttling products between countries and consolidating capital in certain places, namely the U.S., Japan and Western Europe. This vision of globalism with its transcendence of cultural differences is different than earlier, decidedly Modernist visions of universal communication based on the hopes for a shared visual language<sup>5</sup> [ *figure 3* ]. While English may be the international language of business, it is the language of capital that facilitates the exchange of goods, the accumulation of wealth and the ever-increasing penetration of foreign markets by transnational corporations. At a global scale, the circulation of graphic design is predicated on its instrumental use by and for dominant interests. However, reactions to the forces of corporate im-





[figure 3]  
Otto Neurath, ISOTYPE chart, from *READING ISOTYPE*, by  
Ellen Lupton in *Design Discourse*, 1989, p.150.



[figure 4]  
Matt Mullican, "Signs," oilstick on canvas, 1987.



perialism and cultural homogenization vary from wholehearted embrace to subversive resistance, including much in between these opposing positions. It is some of these uses or reactions to the more dominant forms of visual language, and the interests they support, which I would like to journey through.

### Trickle-up Aesthetics: Artistic Appropriations

The world of logos, symbols and pictographs, as the invention of graphic design, becomes the material of artistic production through the work of numerous artists who came to typify artmaking in the 1980s, using the language, style, and the promotional strategies of mass media advertising. The roster of names should be familiar, from "image-scavenging" artists such as Barbara Kruger to "wordsmiths" of language such as Jenny Holzer, all of whom provide, in different ways, a critique of mass media. In these artistic strategies, the traffic in signs moves from the spaces of popular culture to the spaces of elite culture — into the world of museums, galleries, alternative spaces, art journals and eventually art history. The work of three artists serves to illustrate the reuse of two types of signs; one type held within the public domain and the other circulated within the public domain but protected from infringement through copyright and trademark registrations.

The signs, symbols, and pictographs of the public sphere are the subject of artist Matt Mullican's work [ *figure 4* ]. These signs should be familiar to anyone who moves about in today's society; high-contrast, simplified, and silhouetted forms, some personified with names like "Mr. Yuck" but the vast majority living life in anonymity. These signs constitute what Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller refer to as a form of contemporary "hieroglyphics," occupying a "space between pictures and writing," and combining "the generality of the typographic mark with the specificity of pictures."<sup>6</sup> These signs exist in society for the purpose of conditioning our behavior and controlling our actions, limiting choices by simplifying options. As Henri Lefebvre notes, "the signal commands, controls behavior and consists of contrasts chosen precisely for their contradiction (such as, for instance, red and green)"<sup>7</sup> thereby paring down options by setting up binary oppositions, organized into systems of codes. Mullican appropriates and originates these marks and recasts them, sometimes literally, into situations that point out their presence in the world and that presumably make us question their social function. Critics have been quick to point to the subversive quality of Mullican's work, particularly his more public

6

Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller,  
*CRITICAL WAY FINDING*, in *The Edge*  
*of the Millennium*,  
Susan Yelavich, ed., New York  
Whitney Library of Design,  
1993, p. 223

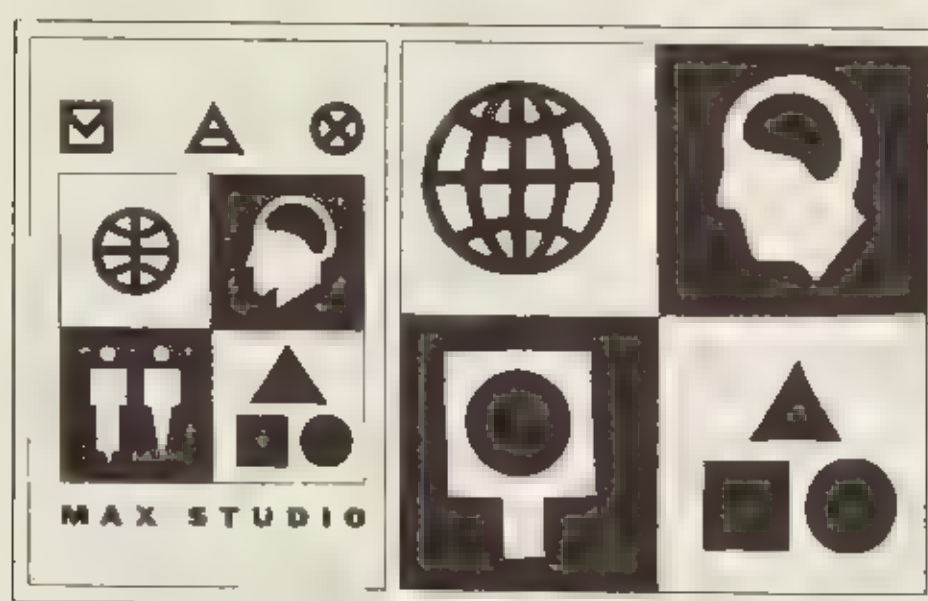
7

Henri Lefebvre,  
*Everyday Life in the Modern*  
*World*, New York, Harper & Row,  
1971, p. 56





[Figure 5]  
Matt Mullican banners at the Palais des  
Beaux-Arts, Brussels, 1986



[Figure 6]  
Left: Leon Max Logotype; Right: Matt Mullican  
From *AIGA Journal of Graphic Design*, Vol 12, No. 2,  
1994 p 48



8

Nancy Princenthal in an introduction to an exhibition catalog for Matt Mullican. *Untitled*, 1986/7, states: "[Mullican] likes to place his work in public places, but its status there is subversive. He does not endorse standard stick-figure/plane geometry signage, but instead returns it to aesthetic consideration." (p.5)

9.

Walter Kalaïdjian, *American Culture Between the Wars*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, p. 224.

10

The original statement was published in *SIGN LANGUAGE*. Peter Clothier, *ArtNews*, Summer 1989, p.146

11

*THEFT, COINCIDENCE, OR ART?* in *AIGA Journal of Graphic Design*, Vol 12, No 2, 1994, p. 48

12

The foundational text promoting this idea is Wally Olins's *The Corporate Personality*, London: Design Council, 1978. For an excellent critical analysis of Olins's text, see: Steve Baker, *RE-READING THE CORPORATE PERSONALITY*, in *Journal of Design History*, Vol.2, No 4, 1989, pp 275-292.

13

Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981.

projects.<sup>8</sup> Walter Kalaïdjian describes how Mullican's works "function to disorient and estrange the 'normal' traffic in social communication"<sup>9</sup> and then relates Mullican's reported reaction to a work that caused Belgian and Flemish nationalist tensions to run high when he placed a large flag on a museum in Brussels using yellow and black, unbeknownst to Mullican as the Flemish national colors: "When I put an image on a flag, I found it meant something very different than when I put it on a piece of paper."<sup>10</sup> [ *Figure 5* ] Mullican's discovery that a change in format changes meaning is incomplete without the recognition that the concepts of cultural specificity and context — those colors, that site, those cultures — are necessary for a more complete understanding of the event. In an ironic turn of events, Mullican and his New York gallery, Mary Boone, are upset with a banner hanging in the clothing store next door, Max Studio" [ *Figure 6* ]. Mullican is arguing that the store's logo is a work he first unveiled as a flag at the 1982 Documenta art fair. The store argues that a graphic designer created their image independently of Mullican and with symbols in the public domain. In this case of ownership and property rights, symbols circulated in the public sphere and considered generic are now argued as unique, protected works, whether by artist or designer. The sites of consumption, whether gallery or clothing store, attempt to control the system of codes and find, to their surprise, the truly subversive irony of their struggles.

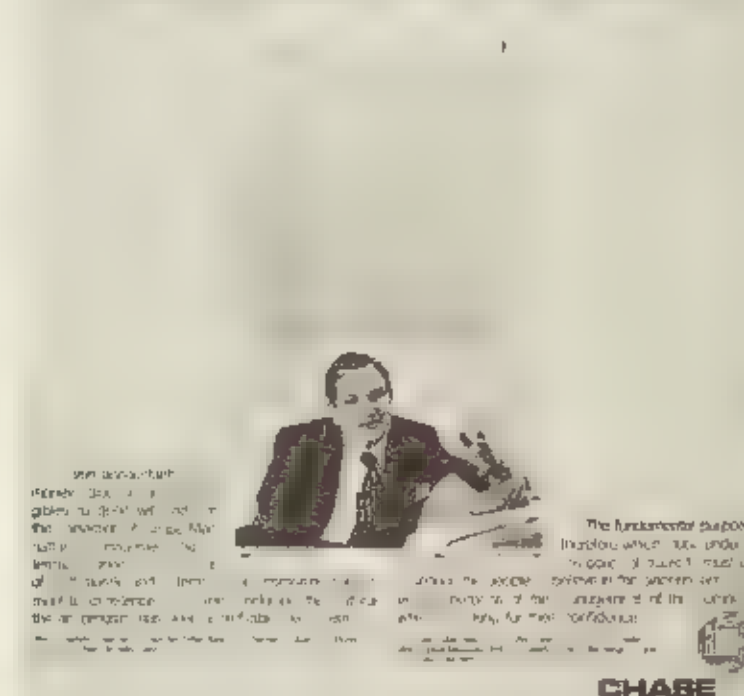
The corporate domain consists of legally protected symbols, logotypes and other graphic marks that circulate globally and have come to represent the corporation itself. Indeed it is argued that these marks come to represent the "personality" of the corporation, its (inter)face with the public.<sup>12</sup> It is presumably the concept of differentiation that enables each corporate body to have a unique, memorable face. Corporate uniqueness is played against corporate sameness in the need for an image that is able to transcend specific cultures and national boundaries, not only in the form of a global spokesperson or universal human themes, but also in a way that obscures the compulsion to consume and the realities of industrial production. The advent of zip code clusters and increasingly sophisticated tracking methods enables a narrower demographic profile of consumers and their consumptive patterns. This penetration of everyday life is supported by the massive saturation of corporate-sponsored images and messages that have effectively substituted the value of the image itself for a product's inherent usefulness or exchangeability.<sup>13</sup> The artist Ashley Bickerton gives us the quintessential late-capital-





[Figure 7]  
Ashley Bickerton, "Tormented Self Portrait (Susie at Arles) #2," 1988  
Collection George S. Elliot, Chicago

## The Chase Advantage



[Figure 8]  
Hans Haacke "The Chase Advantage," (Detail), 1976



14

The abstract, reductive forms of modern art that were favored by David Rockefeller, CEO of Chase Manhattan and an officer of the Museum of Modern Art, go hand-in-hand with the design of the Chase Manhattan Bank symbol, which Philip Meggs describes as "an abstract form unto itself, free from alphabetical, pictographic, or figurative connotations" that "could successfully function as a visual identifier for a large organization." In this way the "free" symbol can stand in for the corporation. Haacke trades on this substitution, "grounding" the symbol in the history of Chase Manhattan policies and corporate ideologies with its use of seemingly neutral abstract art.

15.

Most, if not all, of Haacke's projects meet with controversy and a few with censorship, including his "Hans Haacke-Systems" exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in 1971 and his "Manet-PROJEKT '74" in Germany.

ist consumer portrait in his construction "Tormented Self-Portrait," emblazoned with the corporate emblems that constitute the life of his subject, including Bickerton's signature — objectifying the phrase: "You are what you eat." [ *Figure 7* ]

Mullican and Bickerton appropriate the marks of public life knowing that their reception within the world of art galleries and museums will be received with a knowing irony, effectively negotiating their meanings from their circulation in popular culture to the institutional spaces of elite culture. This pattern of circulation and negotiation shifts meaning from the specific character of a generic existence (the logotype or pictograph in the world) to a generic character of specific existence (the logotype or pictograph in the art world).

While Mullican and Bickerton offer us one critique of contemporary life by representing these signs in a different context, other artists such as Hans Haacke have deployed a social critique of corporate life that focuses on exposing its instrumentality by adopting its language. In a range of works Haacke subverts the propriety of corporate symbols and advertising codes not simply by appropriating them outright but by manipulating them to expose corporate interests that lie behind logos, ad campaigns and spokespersons. A particular example is Haacke's 1976 exhibition titled "The Chase Advantage." [ *Figure 8* ] In this project, Haacke appropriates Chase Manhattan Bank's symbol, the octagon shape designed by Chermayeff & Geismar in 1960,<sup>14</sup> and inserts into its empty center an "advertisement" juxtaposing a statement made by Chase's chairman justifying the company's support of and investment in modern art and another statement by a public relations expert extolling the need for a company to "induce the people to believe in the sincerity and honesty of purpose of the management of the company which is asking for their confidence." This project was part of a series exposing the interconnectedness of corporate patronage of the arts thereby implicating the art world system in a larger framework of corporate interests and demystifying the seemingly neutral status of the museum or gallery. The controversy and censorship that greets much of Haacke's work stands in contrast to the subversive qualities attributed to Bickerton or Mullican.<sup>15</sup>

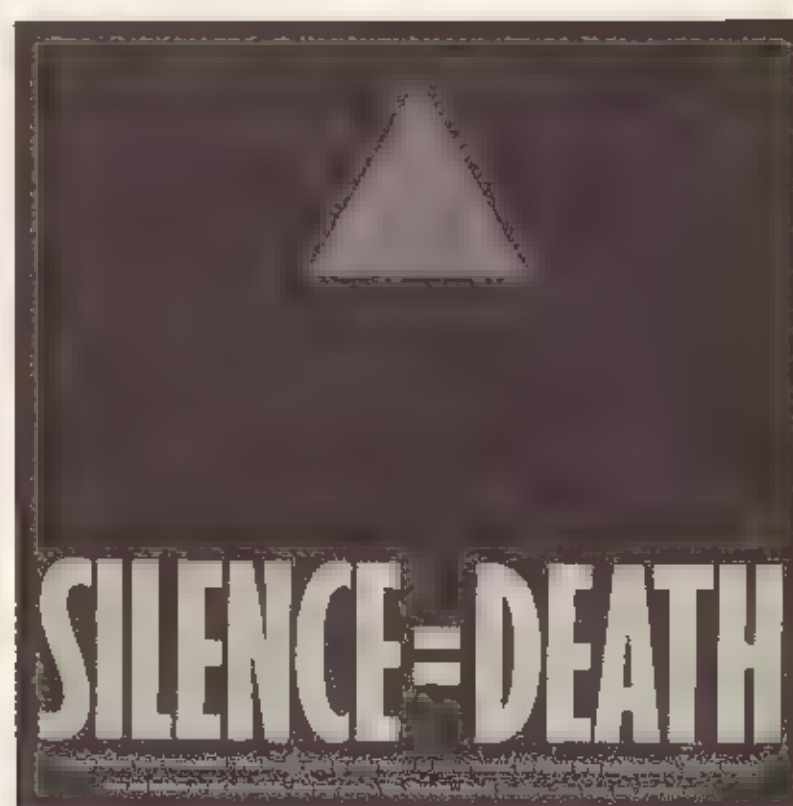
### Stealing the Signs: Voices from Left Field

At another point on the cultural spectrum, in the space of subcultures, we witness another series of appropriations. Stealing the signs of commerce — appropriation is, after all, a term reserved for art — is the ultimate copyright infringement. The equity





[Figure 9]  
Judy Blame, T-shirt design, originally published in  
i D magazine



[Figure 10]  
Silence-Death project



16

Douglas Crimp with Adam Rolston, *AIDS DEMOGRAPHICS*, Seattle: Bay Press, 1990, p. 14

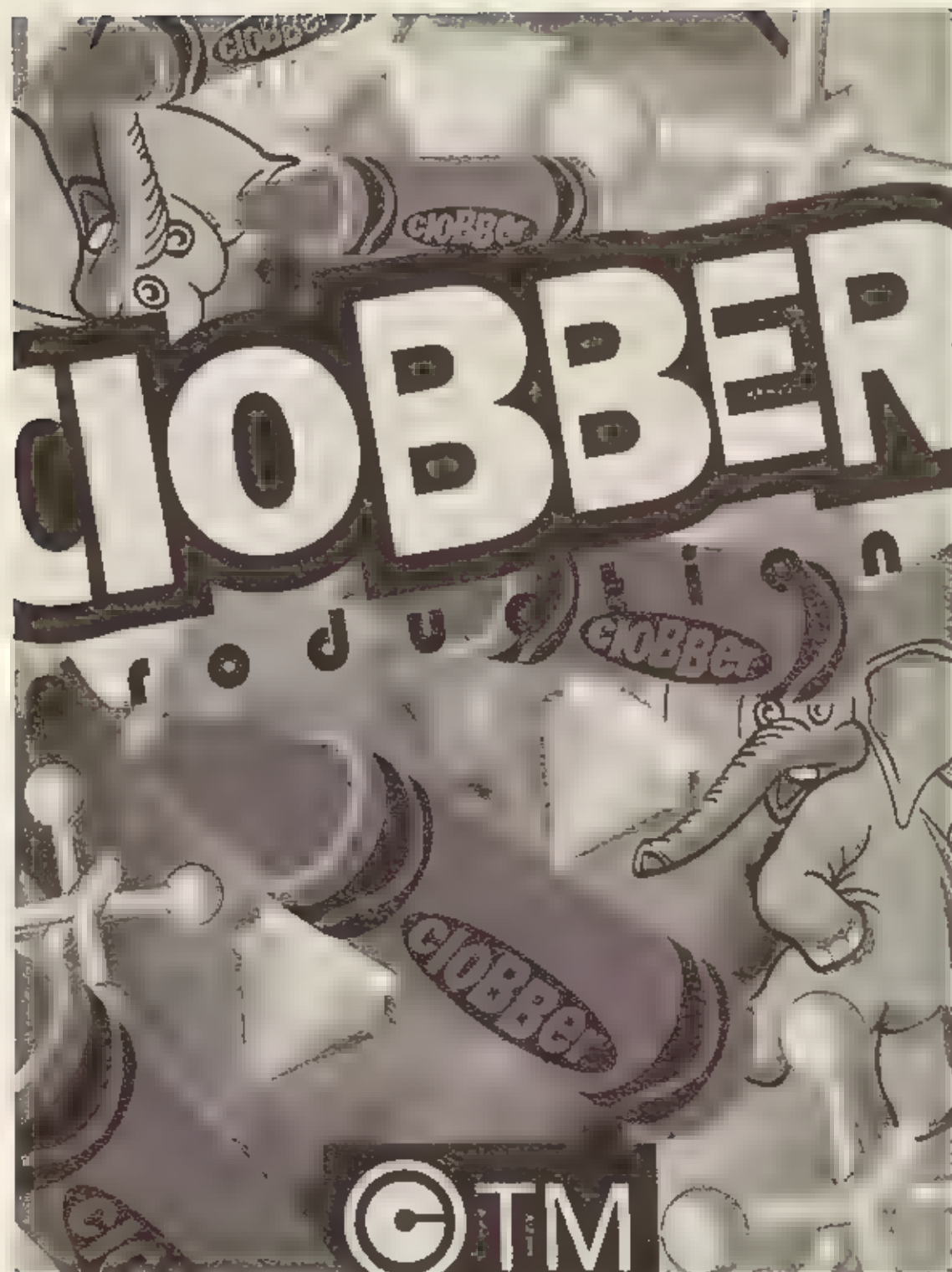
17

Stuart Marshall, *THE CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL USE OF GAY HISTORY: THE THIRD REICH*, in *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*, Seattle: Bay Press, 1991, p. 89.

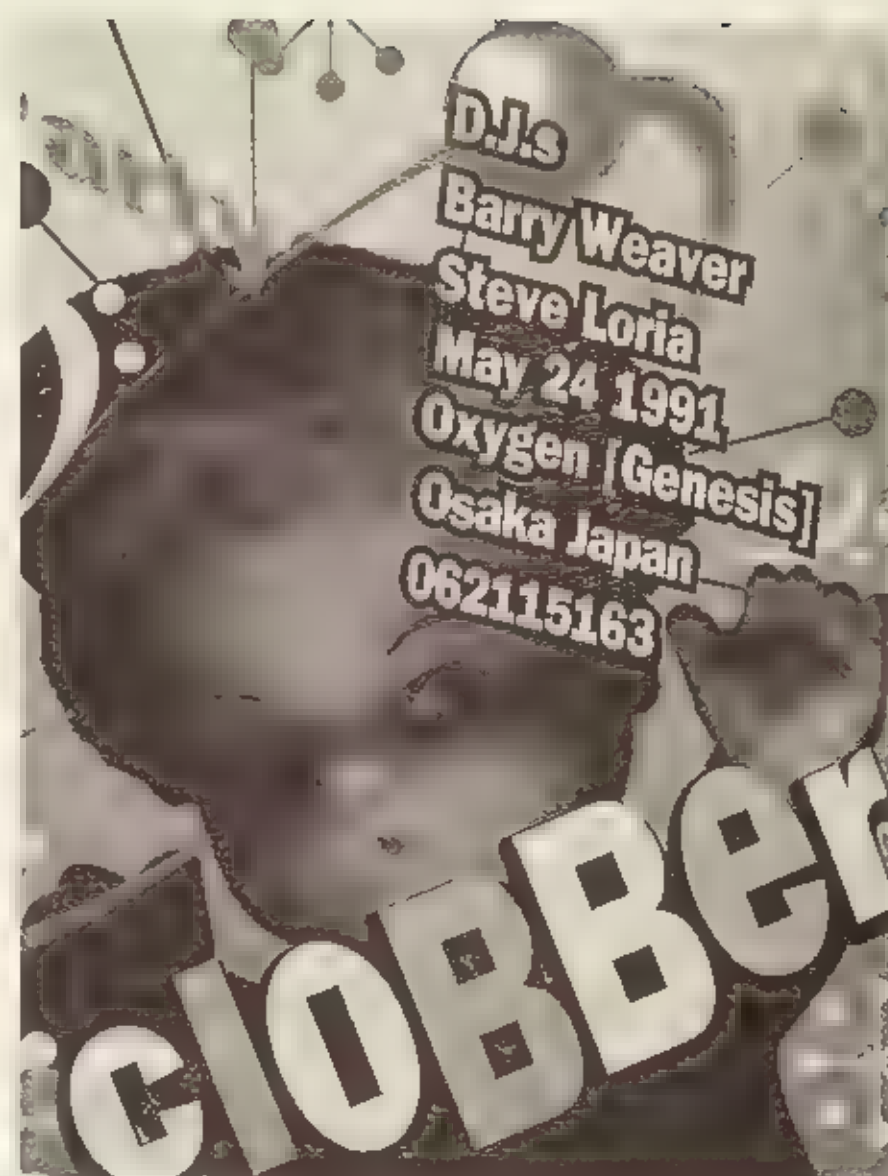
of the sign, its semiotic investment, is emptied and dominant meanings subverted. The hijacked symbol or pictograph is pressed into service, delivering a new message and engaging in what Umberto Eco calls "semiotic guerrilla warfare." British fashion stylist Judy Blame's T-shirt design brandishes the message against the intellectual pollution of Neo-Fascism by recycling the image of "tidy man" putting litter in its place [ *Figure 9* ]. Blame substitutes the paper wad of the famous pictograph with the Nazi swastika, which was previously borrowed from its ancient associations with good luck and fortune, now recovered from history by Neo-Nazis. The obviousness of the political message of Blame's design points out the seemingly apolitical nature of the original pictograph. To say that Blame's design politicizes the pictograph is to miss the original encoding of tidy man — a sign that compels our allegiance to prevailing social standards of hygiene and ecology. Blame's message registers with its intended audience through the recontextualization process, an intellectual project made famous by the Surrealists, who knew the power of the unexpected.

Another symbol of Nazi Germany is the subject of recontextualization, this time by AIDS activists. The Silence = Death Project inverts the pink triangle used by Nazis to identify homosexuals in concentration camps and subverts its infamous meaning from a sign of stigmatized visibility to an outward gesture of the invisibility of the AIDS crisis [ *Figure 10* ]. This symbol of AIDS activism does not borrow wholesale from history, but rather alters the original by rotating its orientation from downward to upward and incorporating the typographic message "SILENCE=DEATH." Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston relate the linkage between a symbol associated with Nazi death camps and the contemporary AIDS crisis: "SILENCE=DEATH declares that silence about the oppression and annihilation of gay people, *then and now*, must be broken as a matter of our survival."<sup>16</sup> Stuart Marshall, co-chair of Positively Healthy, an organization of people with AIDS, has pointed out the problematic nature of this historical appropriation. Marshall argues specifically against the use of the pink triangle as it fosters a notion of victimization, "which has tended to stress death, annihilation, and holocaust and genocide analogies in its attempts to stir the state into a caring response to the crisis."<sup>17</sup> Marshall's arguments are well taken, particularly as they relate to one form of AIDS discourse dominating the voices of those *surviving* with AIDS. However, although Marshall relies on a specific historical understanding of how the Nazis dealt with homosexuals (understood as gay men, lesbians are not mentioned), he seems to inadequately address the recon-





[Figure 11]  
Top and right: Silas Hickey/Clobber  
point-of-purchase posters for clothing line c 1992



[Figure 11]  
Rick Klotz, Fresh Jive,  
invitation for "A United Nation Under Sound Event  
For Love Peace Harmony," 1992



textualization of that symbol or the circumstances of its contemporary reception. The mark itself is not simply *the* pink triangle — taken from the past and displaced into the present — but rather a signature mark combining an *inverted* symbol and typographic *message*, with its own history. The meaning of this transformed symbol registers with its audiences not only because of the familiarity of its previous existence — even if it is a suppressed history — but also because it is transformed in the act of possession. Capturing the language of oppressors, making it one's own, is seen as an important event on the way to ending that oppression and underscores the importance of controlling the codes of representation.<sup>18</sup>

### The Ecstasy of Communication

The appropriation of the symbols and images of popular culture is by now a well documented tactic of youth culture in its subcultural manifestations, such as the Punk movement of the 1970s and the Rave culture of the 1990s. The graphic design produced for Rave culture [ *Figure 11* ] (promoting its raves as well as its diversified interests in things like clothing), illustrates an interesting recent phenomenon of the circulation and negotiation of visual styles as they move from design culture to popular culture and back again to design culture. The Rave graphic represents the technological mutation and synthesis of pop culture imagery and the typographic manipulations available on the personal computer. The Rave graphic entrepreneur, especially as an untrained professional, represents graphic design's technophobic nightmare. The demystified technical processes of graphic design are readily available to "kids" educated on Macintosh computers who have the ability to transform found images and to skew, outline, bend, and otherwise "mutilate" type.<sup>19</sup> As graphic designer Jeffrey Keedy suggests, the source material for much of this work is the stuff of professional graphic designers of yesterday: "The old and low cultures that Rave designers borrow from are primarily American corporate and package design of the seventies and eighties (now there's some hacks)! Rave designers love logos, lots of color and outlined type, and hey who doesn't? The fact that the 'professional designer's' work is now being reworked like any other bit of ephemera might be some kind of poetic justice, but it fails to be an interesting design strategy. That's because their work (like their predecessors) is essentially a one-liner that has little resonance beyond the 'shock of the old.'"<sup>20</sup>

This may be true if you are judging this work with the values near and dear to

18

This phenomenon is by now widespread including the appropriation of terms like "queer" and "fag." Historian Stephen Greenblatt describes the first act of appropriation on the part of colonizers is the abduction of natives to serve as translators

See *KIDNAPPING LANGUAGE* in *Marvelous Possessions*, Chicago University of Chicago Press 1991, pp 86-118

19

See Michael Dooley's essay, *FREQUENT FLYERS*, in *Print*, XLVII II, March/April 1993, pp 42-53.

20

Jeffrey Keedy, *I LIKE THE VERNACULAR...NOT!* in *Light and Separate: Graphic Design and the Quote/Unquote Vernacular*, New York: Herb Lubalin Study Center of the Cooper Union p 9







graphic design, a notion of stylistic invention as innovation inherited from the avant-garde, where newness is next to Godliness. The work is interesting to me because it represents both a form of corporate cultural appropriation and subcultural invention, and it achieves this using the latest tool of graphic design, the personal computer. Unlike the photocopier aesthetic of the Punk graphic, the Rave graphic gains its legitimacy, its threatening posture to professional design from the computer's ability to sample images and seamlessly integrate the results. Gone are the mystifying processes and technical skills that supported graphic design's professional autonomy and what remains intact are the designer's claims to originality and innovation. These claims seem to be the last defense against professional collapse.

The availability of the personal computer enables the maker of Rave graphics to have access to the means of producing graphic design and carries with it the residue of its making. That is to say, the multitude of Rave graphics carries the signature of the computer — its "information texture," to borrow a term from April Greiman. Suddenly the distancing of the designer of the Rave graphic as somehow outside the profession becomes problematic when we are confronted with the highly celebrated designs of a professional graphic designer like P. Scott Makela, whose work carries much of the same technological residue [ *Figure 12* ]. Makela as a self-described "hacker"<sup>21</sup> certainly toys with the distinctions and refuses the boundaries of a graphic designer with his work in other media.

The creation of the Rave graphic produces another code, another style. The unfortunate consequence of subcultural resistance is pop cultural commodification; as Dick Hebdige notes: "Youth cultural styles may begin by issuing symbolic challenges, but they must inevitably end by establishing new sets of conventions; by creating new commodities, new industries or rejuvenating old ones..."<sup>22</sup> The subcultural, as a code, becomes incorporated or assimilated into mainstream culture through commodities, where any subversive power is lost. The circulation of Rave graphics into the space of popular culture creates new effects on other designers. For the professional graphic designer, the Rave graphic becomes a vernacular form, an oddity on the mundane visual landscape of cultural life. It comes to represent a challenge to mainstream society and visual culture, it has the currency of the "code." It becomes the representation of a prevailing style used to articulate a subculture's difference and the professional sees this as an available language with which to engage others. Thus, the language of the Rave graphic is employed by the designers

21

Michael Bierut *SAMPLING THE  
CANDY: P. SCOTT MAKELA*  
in *I.D.*, Vol 41, No.1,  
January/February 1994, p.55

22

Dick Hebdige,  
*Subculture: The Meaning of Style*,  
London: Methuen, 1979, p.96.



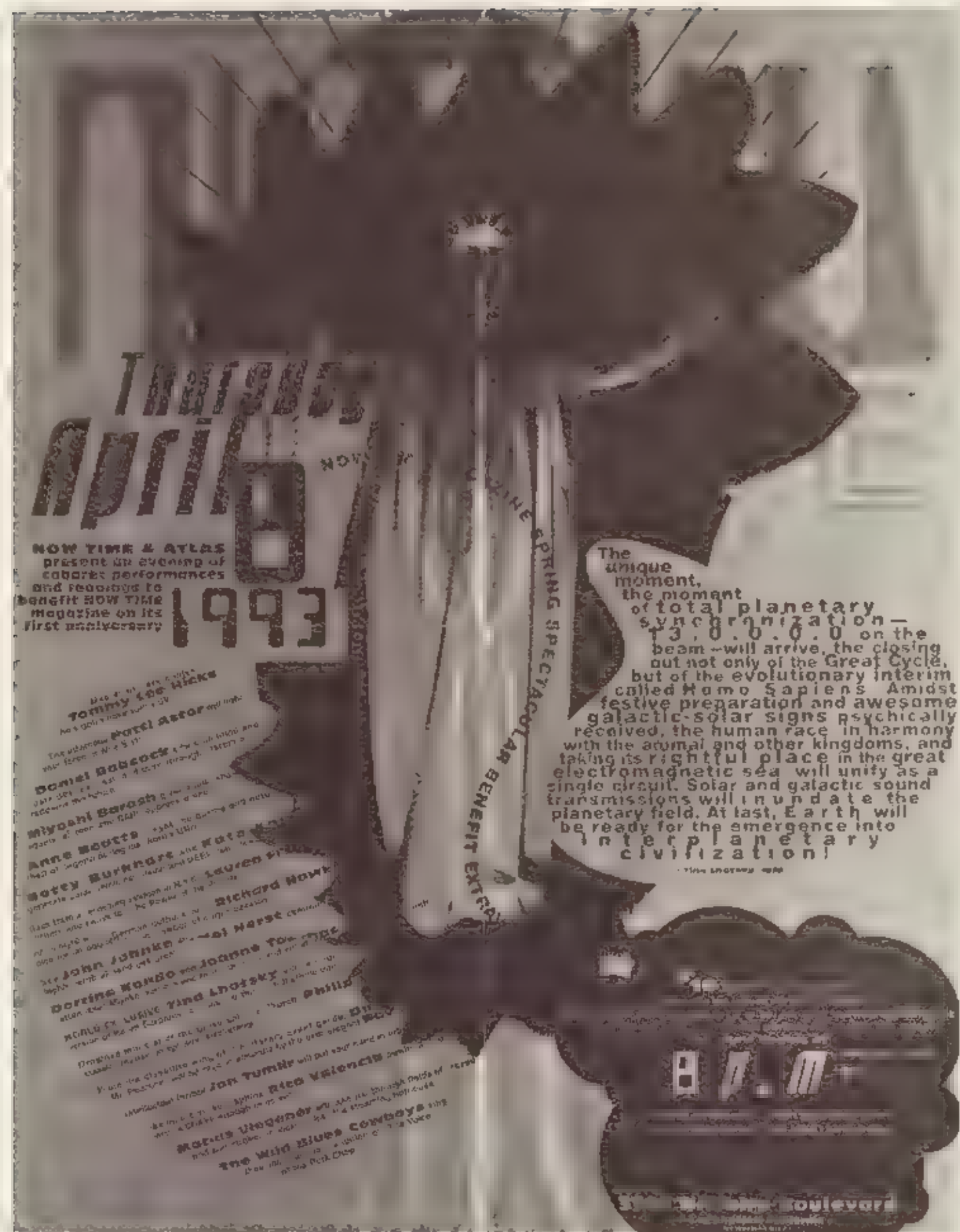


Figure 131  
Poster for Now Time benefit party, ReVerb, 1993



23

Anne Burdick, *A SENSE OF RUPTURE*  
in *Eye*, Vol. 4, No. 14, 1994,  
pp. 48-57

24

*Ibid.*, p. 53.

25

Kenneth Frampton,  
*TOWARDS A CRITICAL REGIONALISM:  
SIX POINTS FOR AN ARCHITECTURE OF  
RESISTANCE*, in *The Anti Aesthetic:  
Essays on Postmodern Culture*,  
Hal Foster, ed., Seattle: Bay Press,  
1983, pp. 16-30

"The fundamental strategy of  
Critical Regionalism is to mediate  
the impact of universal  
civilization with elements derived  
indirectly from the peculiarities  
of a particular place.... But it is  
necessary...to distinguish between  
Critical Regionalism and  
simple-minded attempts to revive  
the hypothetical forms of a lost  
vernacular." (p. 21)

26

Interview with Rudy VanderLans,  
*Emigre* #29, 1994, p. 16.

27

*Ibid.*, p. 18.

of ReVerb to promote a fund-raiser for the literary and art journal *Now Time* [Figure 13].

For the designers of ReVerb, the Rave graphic is but one more style available in the heterogeneous cultural milieu that they ascribe to Los Angeles.<sup>23</sup> For ReVerb, the resulting mixture, the clash of styles, is to be prized for its inclusive approach, rejecting the exclusivity of Modernism. The hybridity that results from this clash of styles generates new forms and new meanings. As Lorraine Wild, a partner in ReVerb, states: "We use styles like maniacs but we never use them lock, stock and barrel... We would usually manipulate them to create some kind of tension. No style is good or bad, it's just another style — whether you use it wholesale or not."<sup>24</sup>

Authentic culture is gone, if it ever existed, and what is left is the material of invention. Ripe for quotation and parody, the styles of multiple cultures are presumably available to all. The graphic designer, seeking to speak to different pockets of culture, draws upon a range of styles supposedly denied it under the guise of Modernism or the rules of professional practice. If the multiple cultures of Los Angeles represent a vernacular language, then a case could be made for ReVerb's work responding to the unique conditions and particular circumstances that are endemic to L.A. — a practice Kenneth Frampton labels "critical regionalism."<sup>25</sup>

A much larger cultural space of appropriation is envisioned by the Designer's Republic, who would go as far as another planet for inspiration and certainly as far as Japan, without ever leaving Sheffield. In the Age of Information, firsthand contact seems potentially corrupting for designer Ian Anderson: "In some ways [a trip to Japan] may mark the end of an era, as I would lose my isolationist naiveté about the Japanese culture."<sup>26</sup> In an interview with Rudy VanderLans, the Designer's Republic sets itself up as thoroughly Postmodern, in tune with pop culture and reveling in the contradictory stances that are indicative of graphic design's anonymous social status and the celebrity status that comes with an identifiable style. Anderson describes the appropriation tactics of their style as it relates to the bigger social framework of contemporary life, where everything is up for grabs:

"If there's something which suits our purpose, we'll use it, but we don't discriminate when it comes to inspiration. There is no hierarchy in the age of plunder, there is equality; from the humble sweet wrapper, through the billboard on the side of a bus right up to sacred texts of Bradbury Thompson and Weingart himself."<sup>27</sup>

In this way, the potential subjects of appropriation are equally available for reuse, while all other hierarchies are preserved, especially the role of the designer.





Figure 14



In a particularly telling passage commenting on someone who appropriated a Designer's Republic design, Anderson states his conditional approval: "I don't really have a problem with it as long as it doesn't detract from what we do, as long as it is used to create something new, something more than it was before and providing there is a reason for it beyond lack of imagination."<sup>28</sup>

The values to which they subscribe are precisely those that are used to sustain professional graphic design: originality, innovation and rationality; and these are, ironically, the virtues we associate with Modernism, not necessarily Postmodernism. Anderson, however, does not wish to change the social status of graphic design itself and does not believe that he is in a "position to improve [society's] condition," and will continue "to enjoy the game I find intriguing."<sup>29</sup> Part of that game is establishing a position within graphic design that simultaneously tries to defy it — extending beyond the confines of the profession and into the global flow of images.

In what might be an emblematic image for this position, the Designer's Republic has merged the icon of '70s pop culture, the smiley face, with one of the icons of "good design," Paul Rand's Westinghouse symbol of 1960 [ *Figure 14* ]. In a gesture indicative of cultural genetic engineering, the Designer's Republic has created a symbol of the hesitant space between a highly protected corporate image and a highly marketed cultural image, effectively fusing pop and corporate culture's underlying sameness: the ubiquity of the mantra "good design-is-good business" with the banality of "have a nice day."

Makela, ReVerb, the Designer's Republic and others distance themselves from graphic design proper in their respective ways: by transgressing professional boundaries, rejecting professional standards, or denying that they are designers at all.

### What Goes Around Comes Around

The circulation of signs comes full circle, weaving its way from the corporate culture of the anonymous design found in the mini-mart to its subcultural manifestations in the Rave graphic back into urban culture and to the institutions of elite culture — filtered through the professional culture of graphic design proper where it can be dismissed today and copied tomorrow [ *Figure 15* ]. It is the public sphere where graphic design circulates and it is this space that is highly contested, regulated and protected. Dominant cultural interests favor the exchange and circulation of symbols and images to take place in the marginalized spaces of youth subcultures, artistic

<sup>28</sup>

Ibid, p 11

<sup>29</sup>

Ibid p 19

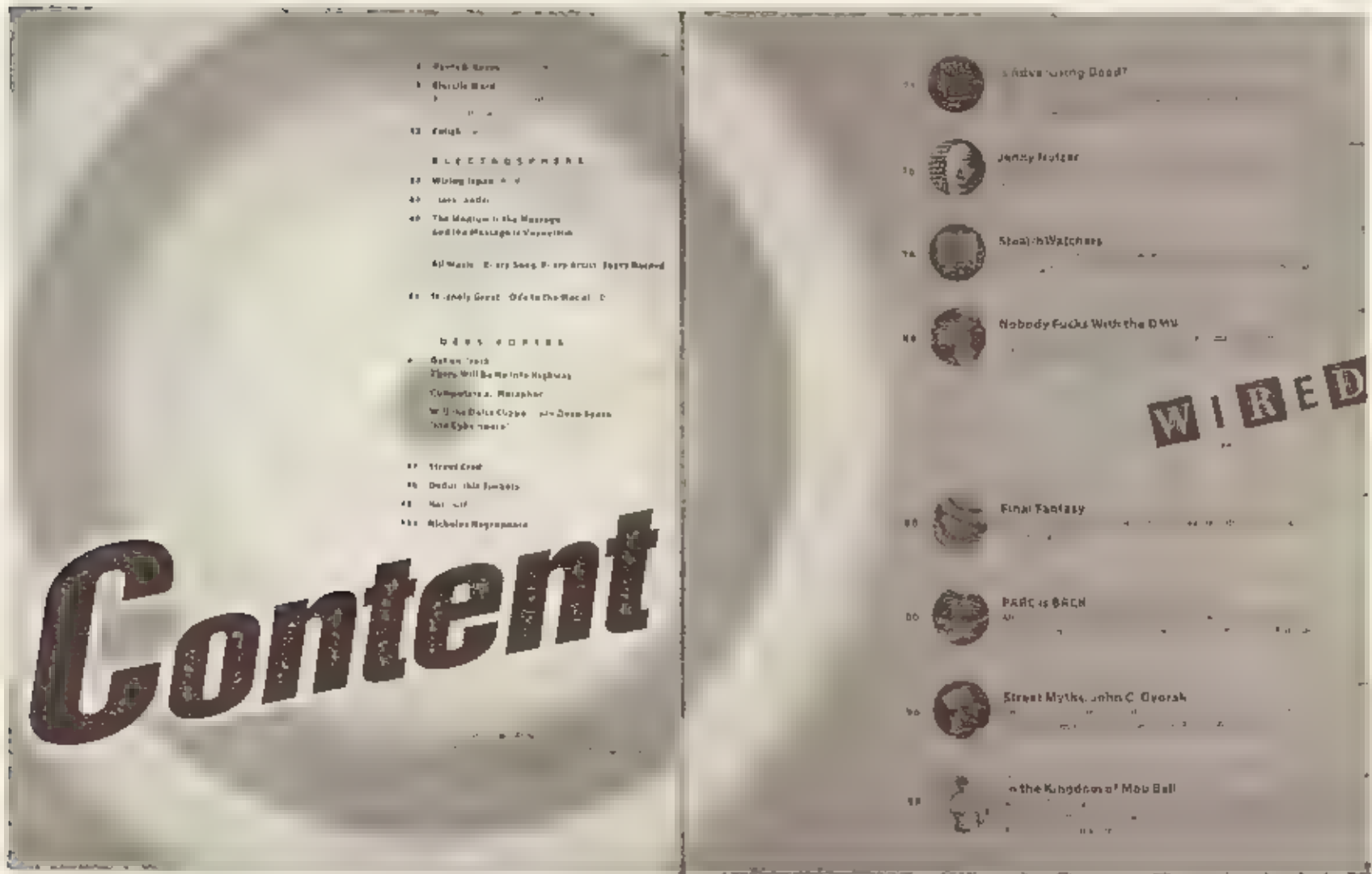




[Figure 15]  
Tide detergent packaging, Procter & Gamble



[Figure 15]  
Rick Klotz, Fresh Jive.



[Figure 15]  
Contents page, Wired, 2 02, February 1994



enclaves, and design avant-gardes. As the artist Keith Piper laments: "... in this mass media, mass broadcast age, it has become easy for the artist to siphon information and images off for our own use, it however remains almost as difficult as ever, to find a space to return and distribute the results of our activities within that mass media. Access to the existing channels of mass communication still remain firmly in the hands of the enfranchised and empowerment within those channels remains their closely guarded preserve."<sup>30</sup>

The invention of style, whether on the street or on the screen, will continue in spite of the forces of homogenization, because it is thought to reflect the heterogeneous quality of life. Style could be better understood as a manifestation of culturally specific communications rather than a byproduct of some nebulous cultural "fallout" or an exotic language of difference. The designer needs to consider his or her role in a society that is increasingly stratified and culturally differentiated. Perhaps this is what Lorraine Wild has in mind when she says: "We need more graphic design particular to the tribes, not less."<sup>31</sup>

Any attempt to understand design as somehow fixed in a hierarchy of cultural spaces (high or good design versus low or kitsch design) or in a historical linearity of precedent and influence (originators and impostors) seems futile. Design should know that its place is not fixed, that design resides in all spaces. The traffic in signs that design produces circulates among these spaces, negotiating the differences of multiple positions of social and cultural identities. The privileged space reserved for the professional designer, either real or imagined, has been perforated by the historical and theoretical demise of Modernism as well as by the technological democratization of the means of producing graphic design. The resulting trauma of this violent perforation in the social fabric of design culture allows us the opportunity to discover our own precarious position, both in and around.

30.

Keith Piper, FORTY ACRES AND A MICROPROCESSOR, in *Place, Position, Presentation, Public*, Ine Gevers, ed., Maastricht, the Netherlands. Jan van Eyck Akademie, pp.263 & 266.

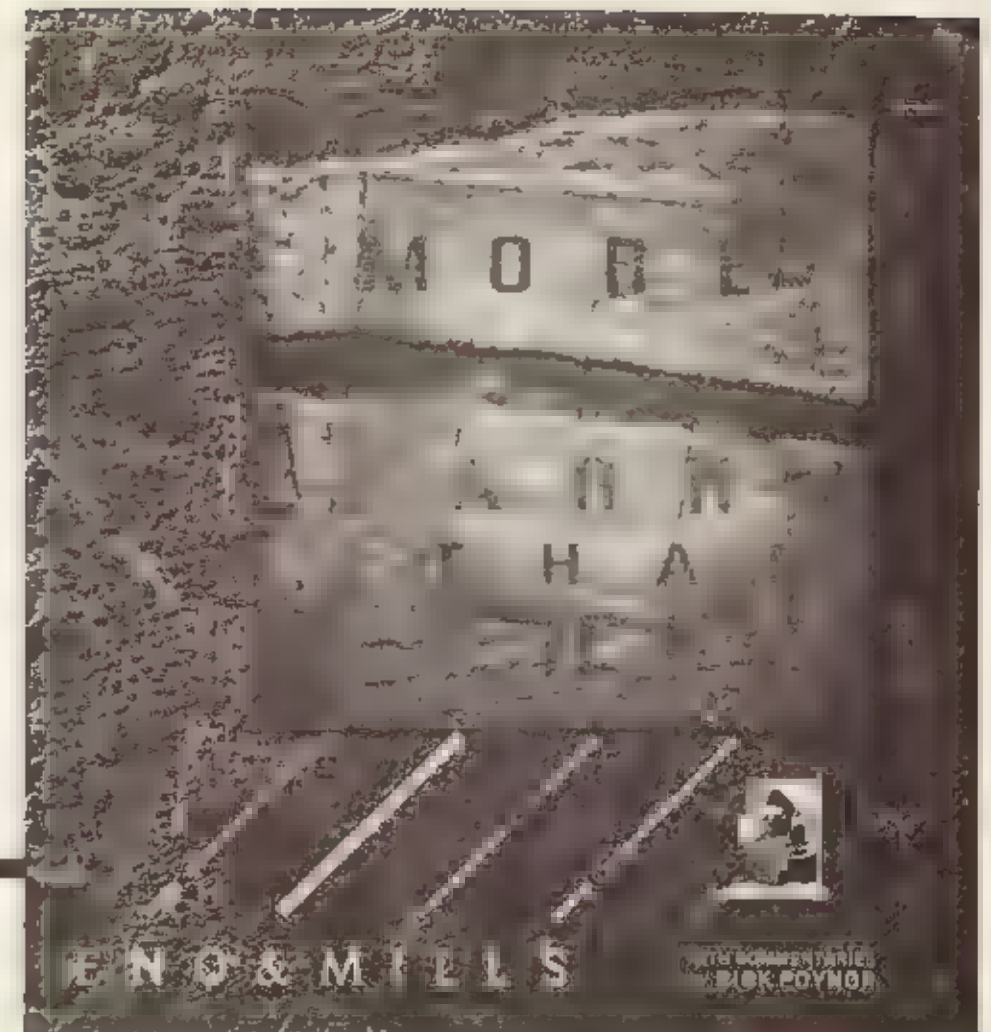
31

Laurie Haycock Makela and Ellen Lupton, UNDERGROUND MATRIARCHY, in *Eye*, Vol.4, No.14, 1994, p.46



## An Interview with Rick Poynor

By Mr. Keedy



[Figure 16]  
Cover, *More Dark Than Shark*, Malcolm Garrett, 1986

Even if you want to  
function critically as a writer  
on the inside of design, you're aware that there's a  
need for caution  
because your readers quite understandably expect you  
to be on their side as professionals.  
And why would you spend so much time writing for a  
professional audience if you weren't?



Mr. Keedy: How did you get involved in design writing and criticism?

Rick Poyner: By a very roundabout route, though looking back there was a certain consistency to it. I always thought in a fairly critical way, even as a teenager, and I was concerned to make judgments about music, visual art, film and literature, although not consciously at that point about graphic design. Now, when I think back, I remember all those logos in my childhood that appealed to me, in a mysterious way. So the seeds of interest were embedded a long time ago.

K: I could say very much the same thing, and I became a graphic designer. While you, by contrast, became a writer and critic.

P: During my teenage years, I was interested above all in two things: literature and art. I was obsessed with language and writing, but I was also aware of the world of images and I visited London galleries and museums regularly. I was unsure which direction to take and I remember having conversations with teachers telling me I had to go one way or the other. I'd studied English literature and I had a certain amount of skill in drawing and painting, so I applied for a mixture of university courses in art history, fine art and English. I wound up studying the history of art. It's said that you're either a visual or a verbal person, but for me both worlds are extremely intense, evocative, emotional and the source of different kinds of ideas. This is the underlying logic of what I'm doing today. I'm still still obsessed with the visual, but I write about it.

K: At that time, were you making a distinction between design and art?

P: Not a conscious distinction. The art room at school had a printing press and I slightly looked down on that idea. Fine art, the world of painting, sculpture and drawing, was such a revelation, and it took a long time to see everything, to read about it and assimilate it. It was not a bad place to start. It gave me the skills of looking and visual analysis that I've been able to apply elsewhere. It wasn't until later, when I found myself working at a book production company in my early twenties, that I started to look more seriously at graphic design and to read practical books about typography. It's almost a quaint idea now, but they had a couple of old-time proofreaders there, old boys steeped in print, using colored pens in the right way on the proofs. I worked in most of the departments and was fascinated by it. On the strength of this experience, I got a job with a big American computer consultancy in London, putting together brochures and house magazines using a CRTronic typesetter. This is how I came to understand, firsthand, picas and points and leading and how to organize a page. So I've actually done design work, but I make no claims for it whatsoever. It's doubtless very amateurish stuff.

By this stage, in the early eighties, I was reading some of the professional magazines and all these interests were beginning to coalesce. But it took me until my mid-twenties to come to the blindingly simple realization that my ability to write was a saleable skill. For a couple of years I worked for two computer magazines, learning the basics of journalism. Throughout this period, I was also working on what was intended to be a biography of Brian Eno. I was deeply immersed in the subject, and since there was no book on Eno, I decided I was going to be the one to do it. I pestered his manager until finally I was granted an interview even though I had no track record. Through this I met the artist Russell Mills, who had been working on a long-promised Eno/Mills book consisting of a series of images depicting Eno songs. Russell, recognizing a fellow enthusiast, invited me to write the text. *More Dark than Shark* was a genuinely multi-media project that incorporated song lyrics, notebook extracts, imagery, design by Malcolm Garrett, and my commentaries on aspects of Eno and Mills's work. It was eventually published in 1986 [ *figure 16* ]. It was a lucky break, early in my writing career, and meant I could move into an area of journalism more in keeping with my background and interests.



K: And this is when you entered the world of design writing.

P: Yes, and I've now been writing full-time about design, for various design magazines, for eight years. The first four years were pretty generalist. I wrote about architecture, interiors, furniture, industrial design on occasion, graphics and art. And for the last four years, since the launch of *Eye* [figure 17] at the end of 1990, I've been almost exclusively focused on graphic design, the area that interests me most.

K: And before *Eye* you worked at *Blueprint*?

P: Yes, I started there as deputy editor in 1988. I had always wanted to work on *Blueprint* and when I met them it "clicked." *Blueprint* was a liberating moment for me. I had the freedom to write about anything I wanted within the design area, and to pursue my own interests. In graphic design I wrote about everyone from Hard Werken to Milton Glaser to all the young English people: Brody, Saville, Oliver, Why Not, and so on. As I was doing this, I was beginning to think about the idea of a new graphic design magazine. In Britain, there was nothing out there that really fitted the bill. And as with the Eno project, I got this crazy conviction that I should be the one to do it.

K: Did you feel there was a market for it? That it was a practical idea?

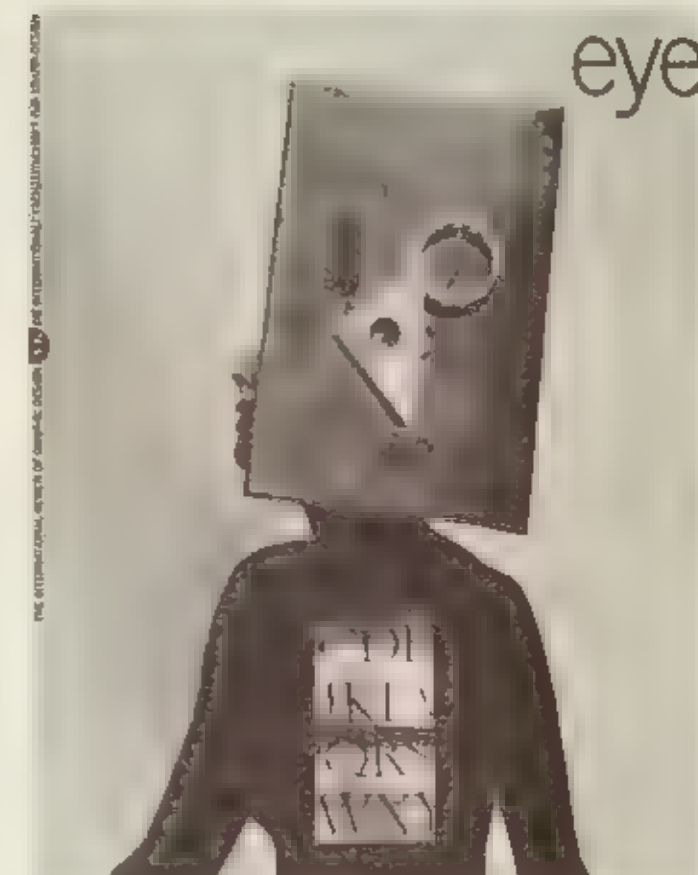
P: I did think it was practical. I don't like marketing-speak and I don't want to talk in terms of market niches. My sense as a reader was that there was a kind of a discussion that wasn't happening in Britain and a kind of publication that didn't exist. We had two well established monthly titles, *Creative Review* and *Direction*, which were pretty much head-to-head (*Direction* subsequently folded). They were news-led and had a broad range of creative subject matter, including advertising. Features tended to be short, fairly superficial and were written, by and large, by journalists. I wanted a less parochial, more international approach, a keener appreciation of contemporary and historical context, and writing that came from a more analytical engagement with the subject. I realized that the designers, teachers and design historians who could provide this would not necessarily be skilled journalists and there would be a learning process.

In defining what sort of magazine *Eye* should be, I was also looking across to America. I was very aware of how *Print*, *CA*, *Graphis* and *I.D.* had written about graphic design, and *Emigre* was just emerging at that point as a source of graphic design commentary, using the interview format. We were defining ourselves against these publications, trying to find our own voice and style of doing things, our own areas of concern. It seemed to me that if graphic design had cultural significance, then it ought to be possible to produce critical writing about it, and American publications were some way ahead in this new field of "graphic design criticism." In fact, I still haven't heard anyone use

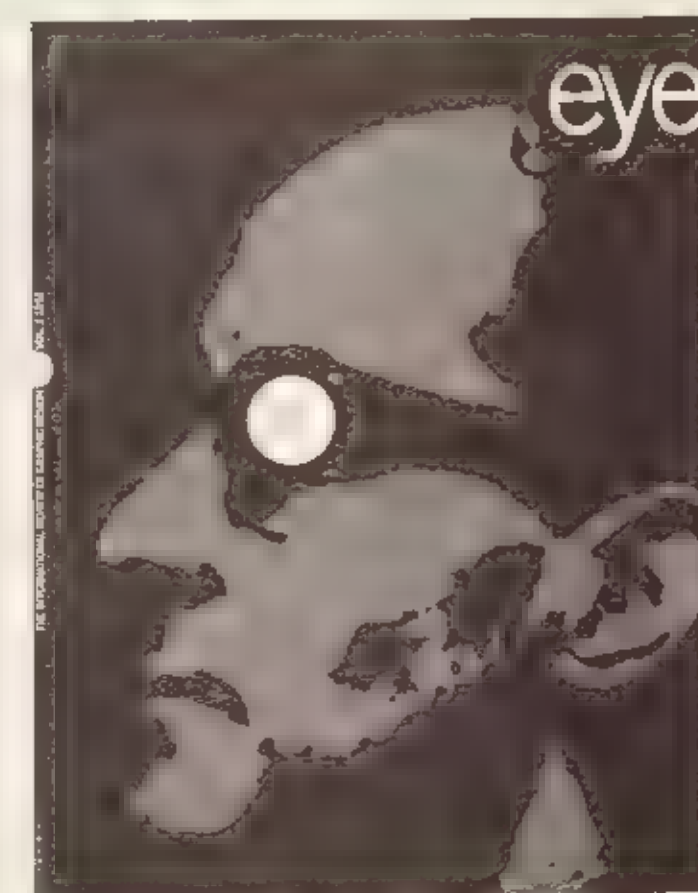
[Figure 17  
From left to right  
Eye 1, 1990  
Detail from *Het Boek van PTT*  
designed by Piet Zwart  
Eye 2, 1991  
Treated detail from a collage by  
Jake Tilson  
Eye 3, 1991  
Detail from a poster for the  
exhibition "Cranbrook Design  
The New Discourse" designed by  
P. Scott Makela  
Eye 4, 1991  
Detail from an annual report for  
Aplicorp designed by Siobhan  
Keaney. Photography by Robert  
Shackleton



Eye 5, 1991  
Photograph by Geof Kern from a  
promotional brochure for the  
Chicago design company  
Concrete  
Eye 6, 1992  
Detail from an poster for the  
play *Pilgrims of the Night*  
designed by Rick Valicenti and  
Tony Klassen of Thirst  
Eye 7, 1992  
Typography special issue  
Designed by Stephen Coates,  
using Trixie Extra by Erik van  
Blokland  
Eye 8, 1993  
American special issue  
Treated detail from *Portfolio*  
magazine designed by Alexey  
Brodovitch

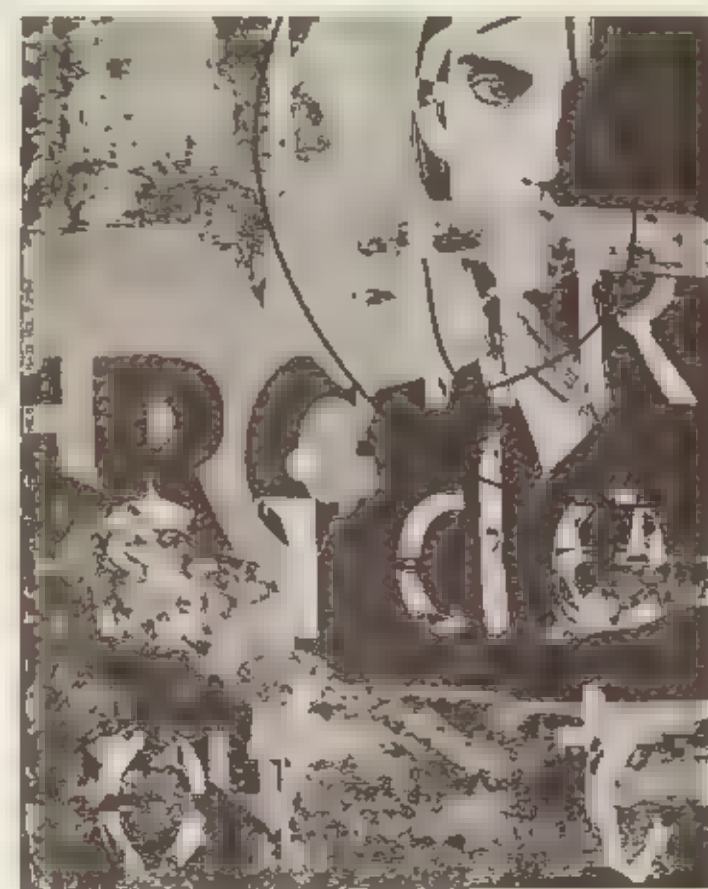
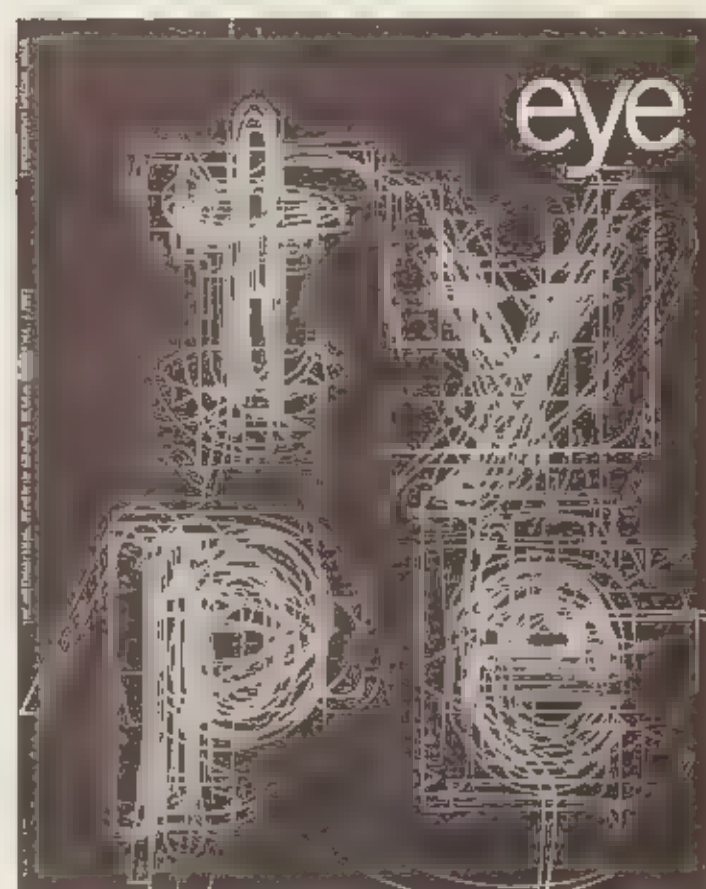
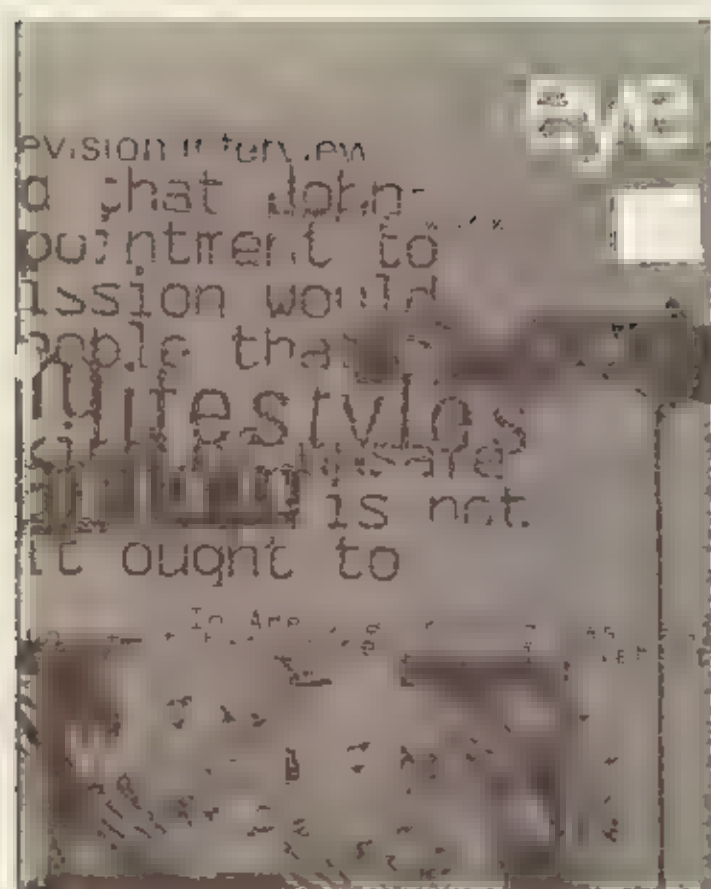
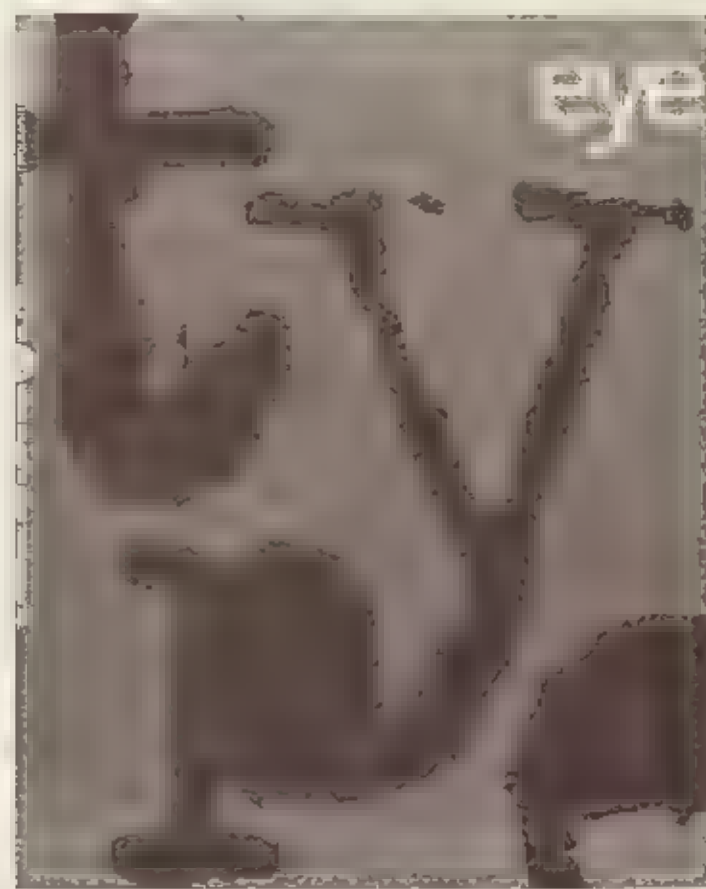
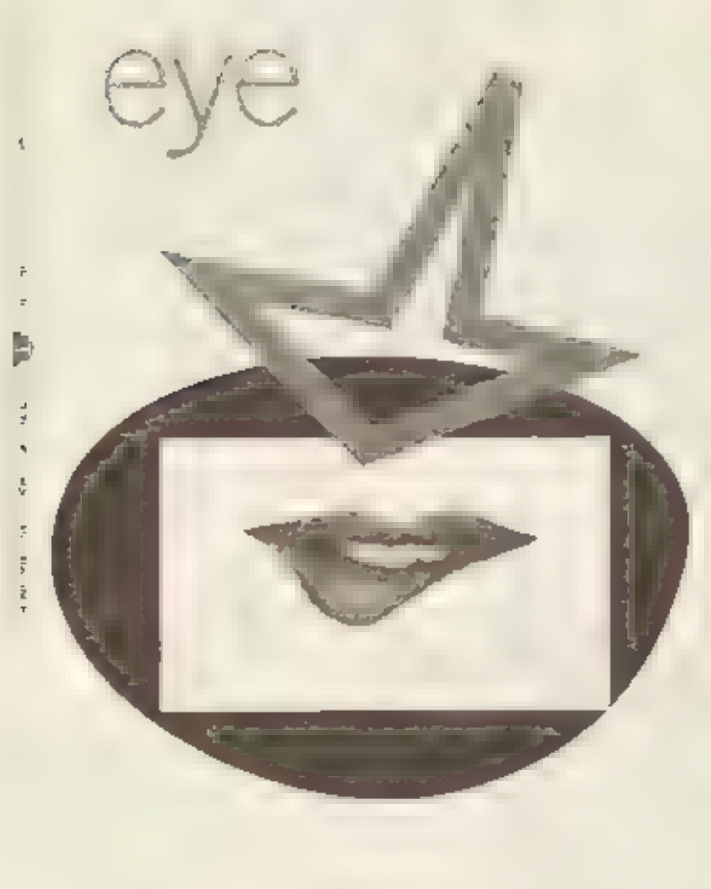
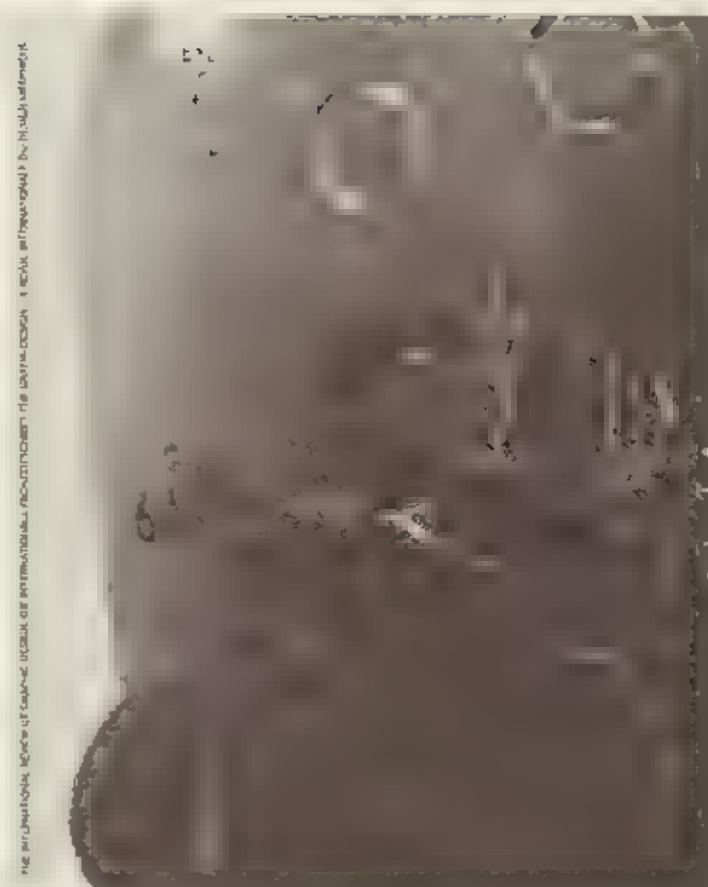
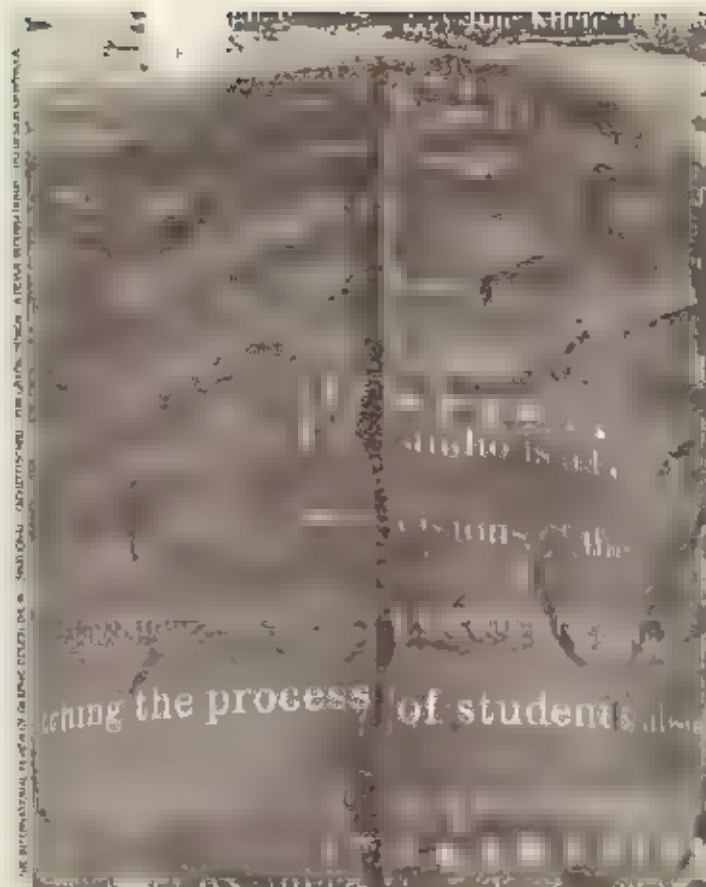


Eye 9, 1993  
Treated detail from the cover of  
*Opus* magazine designed by  
Roman Cieslewicz  
Eye 10, 1993  
Detail from a Cranbrook  
Academy of Art studio project  
by Martin J. Venezky  
Eye 11, 1993  
Typography special issue  
Designed by Stephen Coates,  
using experimental fonts  
Eye 12, 1994  
Treated detail from graphics for  
East German rapper J's album *We  
are the Moral Majority* designed  
by Mathias Augustyniak and  
Michael Amzalag of M/M

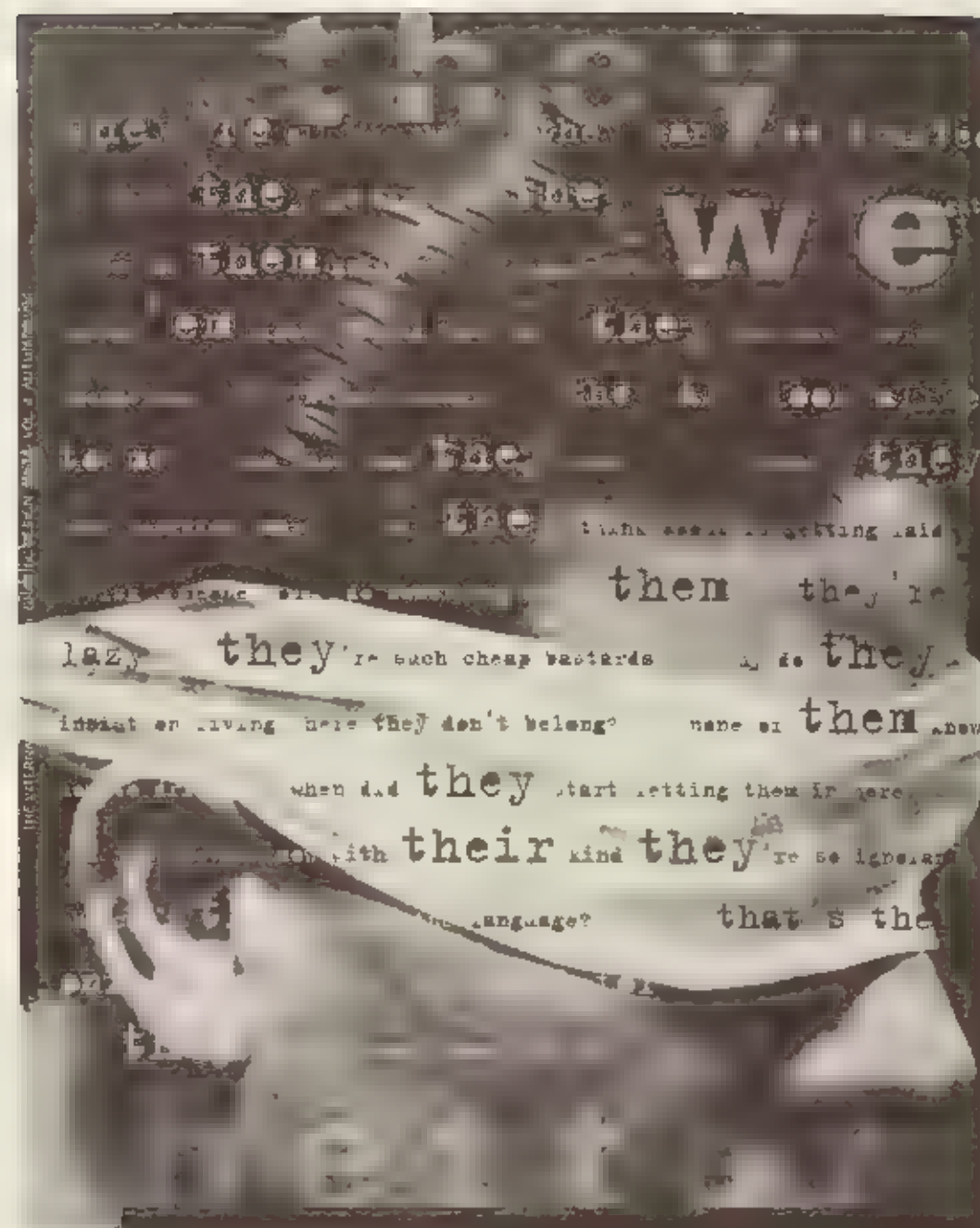


All covers on this page spread  
art directed by Stephen Coates  
Published by Wordsearch

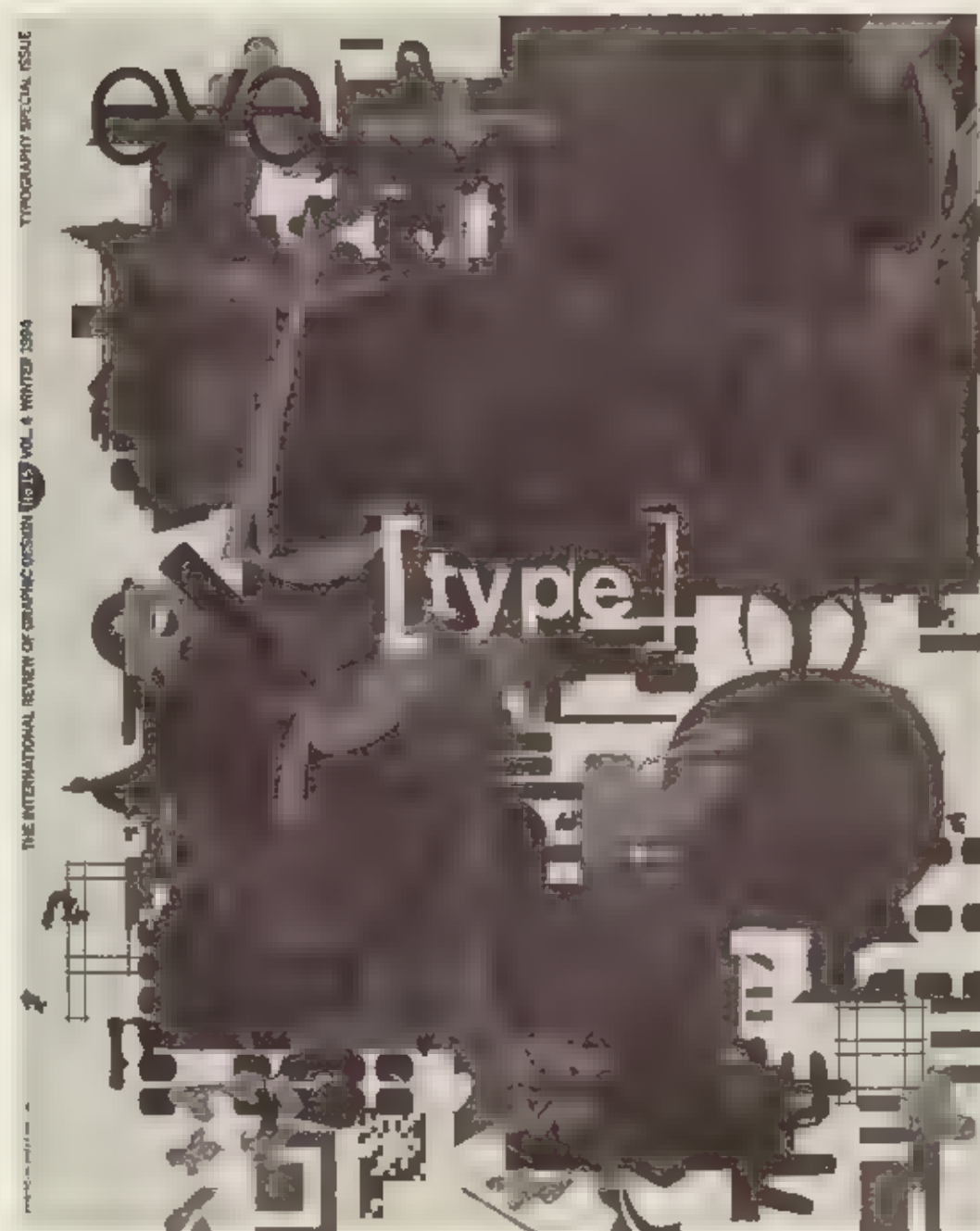








[figure 17]  
 Eye 13 1994  
 Detail from Catalog Design Progress  
 designed by Ladislav Sutnar  
 Eye 14 1994  
 Detail from an advertisement for  
 Atlantic Recording Corp. designed by  
 Bethany Johns  
 Eye 15 1994  
 Typography special issue  
 Designed by Stephen Coates, using fonts  
 by Fuse and Jonathan Barnbrook  
 All covers on this page art directed  
 by Stephen Coates  
 Published by EMAP Architecture





the term in Britain. The approach I have in mind is best described as "critical journalism" — the kind of writing you find in the book review pages of a Sunday newspaper. It's often written by academics who've made a pact with journalism. They understand the needs of a general readership, but they still write at quite a high level. The writing is uncompromised and it has authority.

K: If anything, what bothers you most about writing by outsiders?

P: If you look at a lot of writing about graphic design, it's a case of the "missing object." You get no sense from the prose of what the design being discussed is truly like. The language is trite and unsophisticated. Things are "bold," "simple," "elegant." Now it seems to me such writing is failing at the most basic level; it is denying you a sense of the design's particularity. When I read a piece of writing about design, one of the things I want to know is what sets it apart or, alternatively, what makes it like other examples. To convey that, the writer must be very sure of its visual qualities in the first place and must have the vocabulary to express them.

K: Has *Eye* pretty much become what you initially hoped it would be?

P: Yes, and I'm both surprised and delighted to say that's the case. Starting a magazine like *Eye* is very expensive and an enormous risk. However much you believe in it, you don't know what will happen. We began by publishing in three languages, English, French and German, to increase our chances of reaching a European audience. After four issues, we went down to two, English and German, and since issue seven, largely because I strongly argued for it, we've published in English only. A huge amount of effort and expense went into the logistics of translation and it was editorially limiting: articles were too short to get the depth I wanted. In truth, the magazine I envisioned in 1989, in discussion with the designer Simon Esterson — one of the directors of the original publishing company — was not multilingual. From issue seven, though, *Eye* has been much closer to the original concept. We can now see clearly how we should develop it.

K: Is there anything you feel needs improving, that you're thinking about changing?

P: I want the writing to get better and better, and I want to discover new writers. We have some very promising people. I'm hopeful there are people out there, just emerging, who perhaps haven't published anything yet, but feel a passionate engagement with the subject and have the facility as writers to bring it alive. There are encouraging signs at the moment. That's one of the excitements for me as an editor. Currently I'm using a lot of American writers and I think they're terrific, but I didn't discover them. I merely noticed that they were there.

K: Where on the scale from conservative all the way to radical, in terms of design magazines, does *Eye* fit in?

P: It's probably moved up and down the scale as we discover what we and our writers want to say. In my mind, I've always made a comparison with *Emigre*, because *Eye* and *Emigre* are nicely complementary. I always think of *Emigre* as the magazine that dived into the pool of experimentation, with whatever advantage of being right up close to radical material that brings. *Emigre* expresses this commitment through its physical form: it is what it talks about. But it also has the disadvantage at times of insufficient detachment. I see us as spending a lot of time hanging around on the side of the pool, but rarely, if ever, diving in. We know that important developments are taking place, we're extremely interested in radical and experimental design, and we want to engage with it both supportively and critically. But it's important to us to maintain a journalistic and critical detachment. In the same spirit of openness and critical inquiry, we've also shown work that would qualify as fairly conservative. We're interested in the best and in some cases the worst of both kinds of work.

K: This broadness or openness, is that a kind of democratic ideal or an economic one?

P: The driving force is my own interest. I'm very lucky to be able to say that's the case. I have a great deal of free



dom to determine what my audience is and how to address it. On a personal level, I don't want to lose touch with the more conservative end of design, because it all interests me. At the moment, I'm very interested in populist, mass-market, non-designerly design. It's an overlooked area and something we want to analyze far more. But obviously, if you have a magazine that costs £12 or \$18, it's publishing pragmatism to try to appeal to as many people as you can. But you try to do it without compromising the core aims.

K: So it's a broad area, but it's not eclectic. The thing that holds it together is for the most part your point of view.

P: Yes, I can't argue with that. I'm an editor without any full-time editorial staff. My principal sounding board is Eye's art director, Stephen Coates. We have a shared sense of what the magazine should be. We have an excellent copy editor, and the three of us are a team that goes way back to the days when we worked together on *Blueprint*. There are contributing editors and regular contributors and I'm in regular discussion with many designers. I'm trying not to impose my point of view to the exclusion of all others. But, historically, if you look at what makes a good magazine, it is a strong editorial point of view, which ultimately rests with the editor.

K: I'm going to read a quote from a recent *I.D.* magazine article you wrote titled "Building Bridges Between Theory and Practice." It goes as follows: "A new set of critical yardsticks is needed for the new diversity of applications — many of them still emerging from new media with, as yet, no established conventions. It will be a slow process of trial and error that will mean abandoning our comfortable preconceptions . . . and responding to the particularities of context . . . And if, as observers and critics, we fail to understand the context, because it falls outside of our experience or sphere of expertise, we will have to leave it to those who do understand it. The accepted standards of one sphere will not necessarily apply in another." What comfortable preconception have you abandoned, if any at all, and what falls out of your own area of experience and expertise?

P: The preconceptions I have abandoned probably have more to do with art than design. As I said, I came to art first, at a young age. As a teenager I took art with a capital "A" very seriously and believed in the idea of the genius artist as a person apart. I shed that romantic view a long time ago and in my twenties swung the other way. I'm deeply suspicious of some of the junk peddled in the name of contemporary art and the vacuousness of some of the accompanying criticism, and I found the total commodification of art in the 1980s very off-putting — so much for all those sixties and seventies dreams of "dematerialising the art object." I haven't entirely given up on art, but I came to find applied forms of art — design — much more interesting. Much recent art looks visually impoverished by comparison. I liked the inherently more democratic, mass-production side of graphic design and the fact that the graphics themselves — bits of paper — could not be traded as commodities (though of course there is a growing market for historical ephemera). With graphic design, it wasn't so much a question of shedding old preconceptions as learning about a new subject. Of course, there are areas of graphic design that interest me but fall outside my experience, especially historical subjects. But that's one of the enjoyable things about being an editor — I can ask someone else to write about them for me.

K: What about the issue of Modernism vs. Postmodernism? Particularly in graphic design? It seems to me the European design community is still firmly ensconced in Modernism.

P: Britain is different from continental Europe. I might have been mildly critical in print about the excesses of one or two Californian designers, but you should hear what some of the Dutch, Germans or French have to say. There you will encounter the very thing you as a Postmodernist would probably scorn — moralistic rejection. They think Postmodernism is wrong, that it's frivolous, self-indulgent and doesn't



engage with real human problems. In German graphic design especially, Modernism as an idealistic project is still very much alive.

In Britain, with the exception perhaps of 8vo, it is not ideological. Here, Modernism is being recuperated as style: small sizes of Helvetica, acres of white space, asymmetrical compositions. To you, I know, the style signifies an utterly bankrupt corporate Modernism. In Britain, it can still — just about — signify progressive intention, at least in the aesthetic sense. Actually, in the mid-eighties it seemed rather fresh, and it hasn't gone away in the nineties. Perhaps in Britain it's best thought of as a kind of revival, a Neo-Modernism. Modernism never "took" here with the depth and rigor of the continent. Certainly, looking back, there were designers like Herbert Spencer with *Typographica* magazine and Anthony Froshaug at Central School in the fifties, who were influenced by pre- and postwar Modernism. I don't want to say Modernism was "diluted" in British commercial work, because that sounds so dismissive, but it was a much quieter, more gentlemanly, less dynamic brand of Modernism. Eventually it petered out. No one in mainstream practice was talking about Modernism in the eighties. That's why when 8vo suddenly put out *Octavo* magazine in 1986 and started to produce in a very assertive Modernistic style, to strike postures, issue manifesto-like statements, and declare the unacceptability of certain typefaces, that struck people here as extraordinary and radical [figure 18].

K: Around that same time period, Gert Dumbar was the head of design at the Royal College of Art. How important was his influence on British design?

P: Looking back on the late eighties, there were two schools of influence. You had the Swiss influence as evident

CONT NUED ON PAGE 34



[Figure 18]  
Cover, *Octavo*, 86 1, 8vo, 1986



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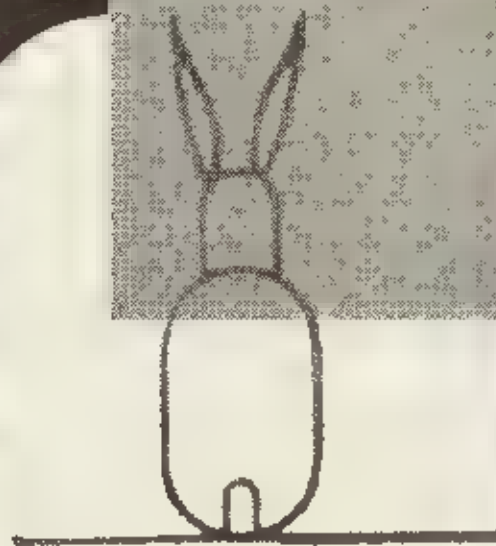
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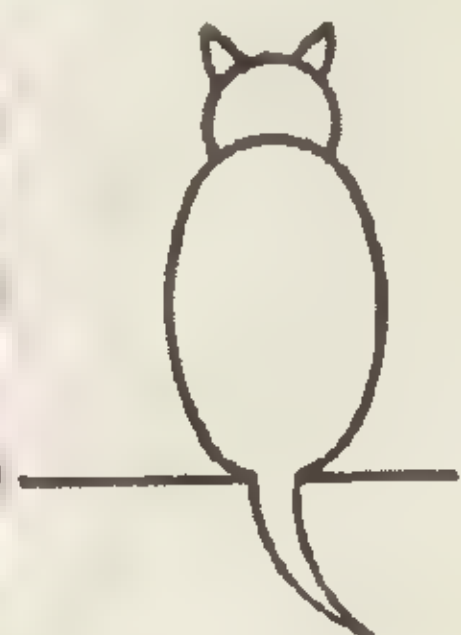


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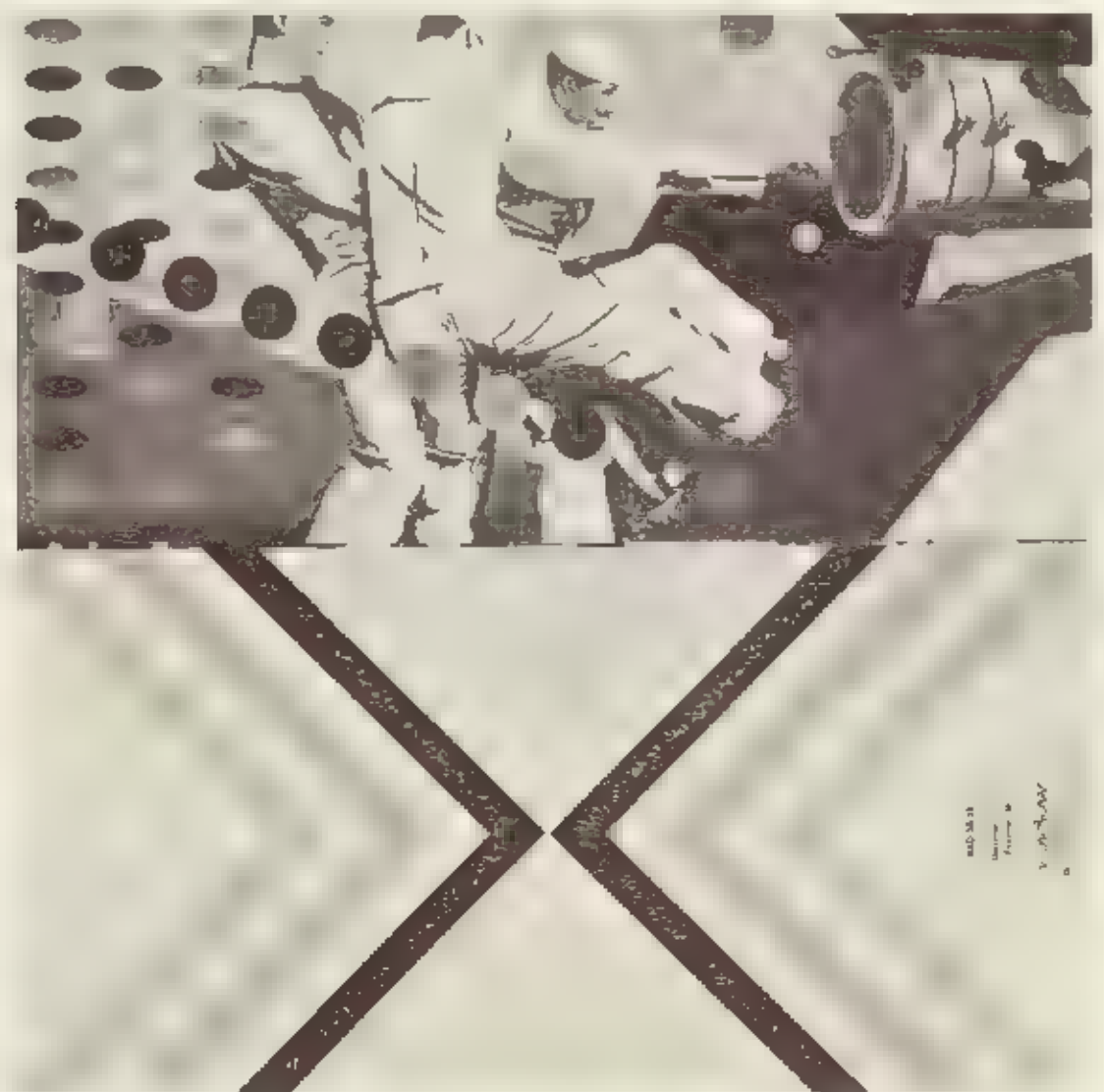


[Figure 20]  
Logotype for Heaven 17, Malcolm Garrett, 1984



Section 25-Always now friendly fires dirty disco c.p. loose talk costs lives inside out melt close hit babies in the bardo be brave new horizon produced by martin hannett engineer john caffrey recorded at brittania row discognatori : grafica industria e tipografica berthold a factory records product fact 45

[Figure 19]  
(Top) CD Cover New Order, *Ruined in a day*, Peter Saville  
(Bottom) Album Cover Section 25, *Always Now*, Peter Saville



[Figure 21]  
Album Cover (Top) and inside (Bottom)  
Elvis Costello and the Attractions, *Armed Forces*,  
Barney Bubbles, 1979



in 8vo's work, in Brody's use of Helvetica, and some of Peter Saville's work [ figure 19 ], and then the Dutch influence. We could argue about whether the Dutch influence is Modernist or Postmodernist, but either way it is a lot more anarchistic in its variations. Dumbbar influenced the Why Nots, Siobhan Keaney and others who came into his orbit. But it was the Swiss inflected Modernism that had, and retains, the bigger hold. Dumbbar's stay at the RCA was brief. Who knows what might have happened if he had been given more of a chance?

K: It's interesting you mentioned Peter Saville. He's one of the few designers from the UK I consider a Postmodernist. He seems to be the only one in Britain who ever came close to understanding the ideas of Postmodernism, the ideas of appropriation, vernacular, pluralism. His work is very conceptual.

P: I'm glad you said that, because Peter was one of the examples in the conceptual category in my book *The Graphic Edge*, which you argued against. For me, Saville is perhaps the most interesting British designer to emerge in the eighties. His work stands up very well. But I do question it when you say it was only Peter Saville. If you look at Malcolm Garrett's "retrievalist" graphics — to use his word — they are Postmodernist [ figure 20 ]. And if you look at a figure who's not particularly familiar in America, Barney Bubbles, whom we featured in an early *Eye*, he was a Postmodernist every bit as sophisticated as an American contemporary such as April Greiman, perhaps more so [ figure 21 ]. He fused his understanding of historical styles with sources from kitsch suburbia and strange conceptual puzzles. He's never really had his due, although people like Malcolm and Neville have acknowledged his influence publicly.

K: With the articles and work you publish in *Eye*, it could be construed that you are trying to bring Postmodernism to the UK, yet I can't figure out where you, as a critic, belong. Are you a modernist or a Postmodernist?

P: The pages of *Eye* probably play out the unresolved tensions of Modernism and Postmodernism in graphic design. I have to personalize this and say that it's a tension I feel in myself. I recognize the "Postmodern condition," and that I'm part of it. I can walk out of here, after we finish the interview, to Virgin Records, and every conceivable form of world music or film is there for the taking. That kind of instant availability of culture in the home changes everything. Not so long ago we didn't have it, and within a short period of time, we do. What Baudrillard found so obscenely fascinating is just a foretaste of what we've got coming to us through the international web of media. You, too, can have 500 channels on your TV. And I'm a consumer like everyone else, so I buy the products and float in this sea of Postmodern possibilities.

The problem I have with Postmodernism is the relativism and nihilism that follows it. At times it seems as though the only "freedom" we can all agree on now is the freedom to consume. I have a strong sense of a younger self living in what felt like, broadly speaking, a Modernist world, with a belief in progress, a sense of the "perfectibility" of people and systems. The cultural ideas that were important to me when I was younger came from movements like Surrealism and Existentialism, which were to do with the potential of the human imagination and how we should live. I come out of this with a feeling that Postmodernism may be our condition, but it's not enough. The human heart needs more. We may be living in a consumer paradise, but for most people in the world the fundamental problems have not been solved. So I recognize what you say; that there is, at times, in the way I write and the areas of design that interest me, a split between those two areas of thinking — an acknowledgement of one, and maybe a hankering after the other.

K: What are the problems specific to design writing and criticism?

P: The most obvious problem is the need to decide on a critical perspective. Design is both a commercial activity



and a cultural one. We need different kinds of criticism to sort out these issues. Criticism that engages with the semiotics of the object, and the way in which it functions within the web of mass-communications, explores the cultural side. But the fact is, with significant exceptions, most designs are created for a client. With *Eye*, though, the business side of design has not been a priority. We've been asserting the cultural side, partly because I felt there was an over-emphasis on design-as-business in Britain in the eighties.

*K: Isn't that curious, though? You say that most designs are created for a client, and therefore it is primarily a business activity. Yet Eye is dealing with design mostly in a broader cultural way, almost in the way art magazines do.*

*P: The business issues have been written about quite thoroughly in other British magazines. But I don't mean to suggest we are completely overlooking these issues. In recent features on ReVerb and Bruce Mau, for instance, the writers talked to the clients about what they wanted, their experience of working with the designers, and the way the graphics met the needs of the brief. But this was within the context of a critical profile rather than as a separate topic.*

*Then there's the problem of the audience's reception of the design. How do you explore that? Like many of our readers, I have mixed feelings about the value of such an approach, a suspicion that too much emphasis on "market research" will have dire consequences for creativity. Yet one's aware that, by and large, the audience is ignored in this kind of writing, and not just in Eye. And there are cases where I suspect it's ignored by the designers, too. The interactivity of new technology will oblige us all to pay much more attention to the audience.*

*K: To what extent do you think you're shaping design practice?*

*P: I don't see it as my mission to reshape practice, but I do accept that professional publications, by privileging some work and holding it up as an example, must have this effect. One could argue that the writing we have is in many ways too tightly bound to practice. It proceeds from a position of advocacy. The writer is on the side of the designer, writing for an audience of designers or design sympathizers, and advocating the discipline for industry, economic productivity and social well-being. But to take the stance of advocate is to limit what you are able to say. Even if you are critical, you still proceed from the point of view of advocacy. There is a bedrock of support.*

*It's very interesting to see what happens when people write from outside the camp of graphic design, which occasionally happens in the British press. A writer who is visually literate approaches our subject and tries to come to grips with what it seems to be saying. The tone may be deeply skeptical. There's no underlying bedrock of sympathy. Why should there be? It doesn't matter if the writer offends every designer reading the piece, because the writer has nothing to lose. That kind of writing, which is aimed at the ordinary intelligent reader, is free to say fundamentally different things. It doesn't have to bother about the kind of concerns we have in design. It doesn't have to care about the issues of form or style. The writer might see similarity where we, as insiders, see difference. The design's impact on its audience — its social effect — is likelier to be the overriding concern. Even if you want to function critically as a writer on the inside of design, you're aware that there's a need for caution because your readers quite understandably expect you to be on their side as professionals. And why would you spend so much time writing for a professional audience if you weren't?*

*K. What about the fact that you are not a practicing graphic designer and might not be aware of some of the difficulties inherent to the process of making graphic design?*

*P: I'm deeply immersed in graphic design. I've worked closely on book and magazine projects with a wide range of designers. I've done a little bit of design work, just enough to be able to sympathize with the pro-*



processes and problems involved. However, we don't expect the reviewer of novels to be a novelist, or the film critic to be a filmmaker. It might help, and there are, for instance, filmmakers who have written well about film, but it's not essential to be a practitioner in order to understand a cultural form. As long as you can learn a certain amount about the practical processes, and talk the same language, I think it is possible to penetrate the work. I also think it's valuable, in any area, if critics come in from the outside — it's a measure of the subject's wider interest and relevance. What would it say about graphic design if the only people who wanted to write about it were practitioners? If we are to develop graphic design as culture, it has to be subjected to the same range of analysis that any other cultural form is expected to sustain.

K: Is there an audience for design criticism?

P: The graphic design criticism we currently have is read by graphic designers. It's not read by a wider audience. By contrast, there is a large audience for writing about art outside the narrow world of the professional art community. And the same is true for architecture. British broadsheet newspapers have architectural columnists and sometimes as much as a whole page devoted to architecture. So architecture has established itself as a public discourse. Graphic design is nowhere near establishing that kind of beachhead within the national press.

K: Are you doing anything to rectify this situation?

P: I sometimes write about graphic design subjects for the newspapers. What may begin to open up this subject is that the design tools are now available to everyone. People are creating their own newsletters and desktop publications, using different fonts, manipulating text and coming to understand what design is. It's no longer transparent in the way that it was. When this reaches a certain point, where people understand and play with the visual codes, they will have the keys to the graphic landscape. Then it will be much easier for the writer to address those issues for a non-professional audience. In ten, twenty, fifty years' time, when electronic media are second nature and people have access to communication tools we can only imagine, perhaps everyone will have views on this subject just as they do now on architecture or advertising. By then we may be calling it something different from "graphic design".

K: Recently, in an article for the British art magazine *Frieze* (Issue 18, September/October, 1994), you wrote that, "For many designers, the primary concern is not with what they are saying, or why, but with the 'graphic language' through which they are saying it. In this sense, designers have not changed as much as they might assume: the profession has long been thought of as a neutral service for others, with no messages of its own." What is it you feel is lacking?

P: At this point, the graphic designer has a real freedom to become a kind of author and, as I hope I've shown in the subjects I've written about, I am very interested in the possibilities this opens up. What sometimes surprises me, though, is that while authorship is in the air, and is taken for granted by students who expect to intervene in the work in some way... K: ...There is no such thing as non-intervention. It is impossible for a designer to be there in the design as a creator, and not be there as a unique individual.

P: I agree, but there are different degrees of intervention and I'm talking about the designer being present in their own work not just as a creative personality, but as a would-be author. Designers increasingly feel they should be able to say something of their own through the material and we have the design climate, and the critical and theoretical underpinnings, to make it possible. I support that. What I was trying to say in the article was that some designers, given this opportunity, don't seem to have very much to say other than "Look at these pyrotechnics." I was saying: move on to the next stage and



find something more interesting to say. Or else we will get a showy kind of hollowness.

K: Are you saying that graphic designers, as authors, for the most part, have very little to add?

P: Let me turn it around slightly and pose it as a question: what, ultimately, is the value of a piece of sales literature for a mythical widget, if you like, full of dubious claims, but given the most remarkable design? The actual message is not worth a damn. We don't believe it and nor do the designers. But despite their complete disillusion with the client-given written content of the piece, the designers use the commission as the starting point for creating a piece of work in which they please themselves and explore certain formal issues that are of interest to them alone. This is not an honest way of working. It's hollow at the center. There's a quote in *Emigre* #31, from Gunnar Swanson, that I really like: "Form makes a claim." All these design effects make a claim for the content. Now, on one level I can enjoy the formal manipulation. If you're talking from inside design, it's easy to see that as a worthwhile end in itself. However, if you offer me a choice between the hypothetical widget literature, and something formally similar where the content is believed in by all the parties involved — whatever the content happens to be — then I will find that a more satisfying and honest creation.

K: But is that better design, or is that simply because it aligns better with your own personal, political and ideological beliefs?

P: As a critic I'm trying to decide whether or not the content is true to the claims of the form. I'm not talking about politics or ideology and I haven't used those terms. But, yes, I am bothered by the way in which designers sometimes create work on the back of messages they don't believe in and thereby help to legitimize false claims. How do they justify it ethically? Having said that, I've talked to designers who are perfectly well able to live with this and don't feel it to be a problem. They don't recognize it as an issue at all.

K: Imagine this scenario: A graphic designer is willing to do work for what you and I would believe is a worthy endeavor, pro bono. But the designer doesn't really care about the message and the idea connected to it. The designer does it for his or her own personal reasons, perhaps simply to add work to their portfolio. Does that immediately exclude it from being considered good design then?

P: I'm talking about the critical problem of determining the authentic from the inauthentic. That's not to presuppose anything about what category — commercial, cultural or pro bono — authentic work might belong to, or what it should look like. When the designer intervenes in a way that has nothing specifically to do with the widget, but creates a kind of excitement around the widget, the best you can say is that it attracts attention to the widget, and perhaps the designer.

K: Yes it does that, but the form and personal expression added by the designer is also communicating something about the moment, about today, creating a meaning of its own. Not in words; it's not a specific message, but rather a kind of comment, perhaps a comment on the history of design, which is a cultural comment or critique. It's a message to designers and those astute enough to see it. There are codes within literature and architecture, for example, which exist well outside and beyond the lay person, that are there for the insiders only.

P: I'm not saying that form has no content of its own. Form may accomplish all of the things you are talking about, but for me, as I've said, that's not particularly interesting or satisfying if the center is hollow. Something that strongly motivates me in my work is to try to reach some personal conclusions about value. There are certain problems that bug me and the reason I'm doing this, at root, is to decide for myself what works best.



K: Do you think that you can't be critical unless you have distance from the subject you're dealing with?

P: Yes, you have to keep a mental distance. My conception of criticism is not that it's a negative or destructive process — its conclusions might be entirely favorable and supportive — but that it's a process that has to try to be as truthful as it can. And by truth, I mean being true to your own perceptions as a writer. Writing that denies that truth or declines to say it for reasons of diplomacy or career-building or a million little excuses is not the real thing and is not worth much. Having said all of that, there are subtle ways of telling the truth. A lot of British critical writing on other subjects makes brilliant use of irony as a way of establishing, to the acute reader, the author's view of the subject, without having to sledgehammer it home.

K: You have contact with many of the designers you write about. How do you maintain a certain amount of critical distance, while at the same time gain access to the information you obviously need?

P: Don't turn design into your social life! Actually, you just put your finger on one of the key practical problems that any magazine dealing with visual subject matter will encounter. It's not a problem that is special to graphic design writing; it applies to art, fashion, architecture, product design, and interiors. Without the visuals, you have no story. Clearly, when it comes to literary criticism, anyone can buy the book and nothing can stop the critical process. But without pictures of Michael Graves' latest building, there can be no eight-page architectural critique. And the same thing applies to a graphic designer's body of work. You could get hold of the pieces and photograph them — and sometimes we do that — but it's an expensive way of proceeding. So there is a need to maintain relationships if you want access to the projects. But it's actually much broader than that: there is a need to maintain relationships if you want to function as any kind of journalist.

K: Are these relationships easily jeopardized through criticism?

P: There's always a chance. Anyone who submits to the journalistic process crosses their fingers and hopes. I would hope that designers don't become overly sensitive about this. You only have to look around at neighboring areas in the media to see the dangers. Look at what happened to celebrity interviewing in the American press. It's now so predetermined by powerful people calling the shots that it's almost valueless as independent commentary.

K: It has value as entertainment, not as journalism

P: It would be more entertaining if it were more truthful. Once readers know the rules of the game and that the whole thing is a set-up job, it takes away the fun. If you look back at earlier American and British profile writing, you see the most insightful things written about celebrities and movie stars who have now, as a breed, rendered themselves inaccessible. I firmly believe that critical writing has enormous value, that we all learn from it. No one wants to be on the receiving end of adverse criticism, but anyone in the public eye has to take the rough with the smooth. Some of the very few who do complain have had wonderful press for years. They have a paper mountain of glowing tributes. Their reputations are not in doubt and a few critical remarks by a writer are very unlikely, on their own, to change that. No single writer is that powerful. I don't know any design writers who are trying to destroy by writing. The aim is simply to open up a discussion and try to discover the truth.

K: If it can't change anything, if it's not going to affect the designer's business, if it's not going to affect their relationships with their clients and friends, what then is the advantage? What is your criticism going to accomplish, other than annoy that particular individual?

P: I don't think about it in these personal terms. That's not the aim of the exercise at all. Any change that might ultimately come about is subtler and less predictable than that. Over time, criticism will both chart



and contribute to shifts of thinking, emphasis and orientation within the profession. It seems to me that critical reflection is as important to design as it is to any other discipline. There are many new ideas being explored within designers' work and through the statements they make about it. What designers have to say is especially significant when it has to do with their ambitions for their work and its intended meaning in the larger culture. It is entirely reasonable when claims are being made for and through the work that we address those claims and examine them in the widest possible critical context. The danger, if anything, when you are on the inside, and acting as an advocate to some degree, is that you won't be sufficiently tough. Someone who genuinely didn't care about "designerly" considerations might be able to see the conceptual weak spot more easily. If graphic design is worth this amount of discussion, it can take these occasional knocks.

*K: And if it can't take these knocks, the profession is going to be completely trivialized.*

*P: We simply can't miss this opportunity. There are a number of very good writers working in graphic design criticism, or towards graphic design criticism, and it has the potential to become something much more sophisticated than it has been. We are still in the early days and if we give in to timidity, confusion over aims and motives... K: ...petty jealousies... P: You said it, Jeff. If we don't stick with it, then the danger is that we will roll back to the good old boys approach of earlier years, where every "profile" was a tribute by one colleague to another, couched, on occasion, in the most cringe-making terms. What's happening now is actually a measure of the profession's growing seriousness and undoubted importance. It comes with the territory. It's not a question of hurt egos. This is a grown-up subject and it's beginning to get grown-up treatment, the kind of treatment we wouldn't bother to question in better established disciplines such as art, architecture, film, and so on. This can only be a good thing.*

*K: One last question. You know that Neville Brody and I are about the same age. Who do you think is the sexiest?*

*P: Neville, of course.*

*K: This interview's over. Done, I'm turning off the tape recorder*

CL CK



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**CLAMOR OVER WRITING AND DESIGN  
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# Design (Or Is It War?) Is Hell

By Steven Heller

Before we forget the historical  
relevance and contemporary influence  
of Modernism  
the time has come to reconcile the  
similarities  
between this venerable ethic  
and progressive contemporary  
practice



For about a decade a small war has raged in the design press. The outcome could determine whether or not the ideas of a young generation will supersede that of an older one, and whether so-called theory-based graphic design born in academic hothouses is really a viable alternative to the more or less dominant practice. But since it takes two to skirmish, the war made enemies out of kindred spirits. The *designosaurs*, as Jeffery Keedy calls the enemy, are the representatives of the archetypal 20th century design ethic that held sway after World War II. With its Eurocentric ideals, rationalist dogma, old boy affiliation, corporate association, and fading mythology, Modernism and its aging proponents neatly represented the generational divide.

War is hell. And this was a hell of a war. But despite the rhetoric, the fundamental wedge between young and old is not ideological, philosophical, or even methodological. The generational rift has simply been recalcitrance on the part of a few remaining "missionary" Moderns to open their arms and warmly embrace unconventional work. Despite some undiplomatic — though beneficially provocative — remarks about cultural garbage, and a few critical ripostes about illegibility, chaos, and ugliness, the anti-canonicalists have never been prevented from mounting their challenge, pursuing their outlets and audiences, having their work showcased in magazines, competitions, and annuals, or, for that matter, developing magazines, competitions, and annuals of their own. Ultimately, of course, clients determine who get the assignments, so viability in the marketplace has little to do with whether one design generation is embraced by another. Therefore, without diminishing the intellectual importance of the New Design Discourse and its component parts, a sober analysis might place the conflict on the par of Canada going to war against the United States over the pronunciation of "about" (or is it about?).

The rift is not as wide as one might believe. The fact is, vocal minorities have a natural tendency to alter public awareness and perception. And the young generation's Deconstructivist, Post-Structuralist, Postmodernist, Neo-Digitalist, and distinctly individualist approaches were destined to earn serious critical attention (and a share of acolytes) once the early proponents went public. Which is exactly what happened in the mid-1950s, when Push Pin Studio received kudos (and jobs) for providing an eclectic alternative to what at the time was an even more entrenched Corporate Modernism. Push Pin did not, however, declare war; it simply published a promotional periodical, *The Push Pin Monthly Graphic*, that influenced a shift in attitude and style through its revivals of passé graphic forms, prefiguring the Postmodernist penchant for pastiche [ *figure 22* ]. This appealed to specific markets and media (books, records, editorial) where Modernism (particularly Swiss Modernism) was deemed inappropriate, cold, or impersonal. Although Push Pin's borrowing of historical styles was antithetical to "art must be of its time" Modernism, by the late fifties, such orthodoxy had already begun to disappear. While some Moderns clung to dogma, the influence of new styles forced many others to veer towards more eclectic forms. Indeed the tension between Modernism and eclecticism gave rise to what might be called "Late Modern," notably the expressive



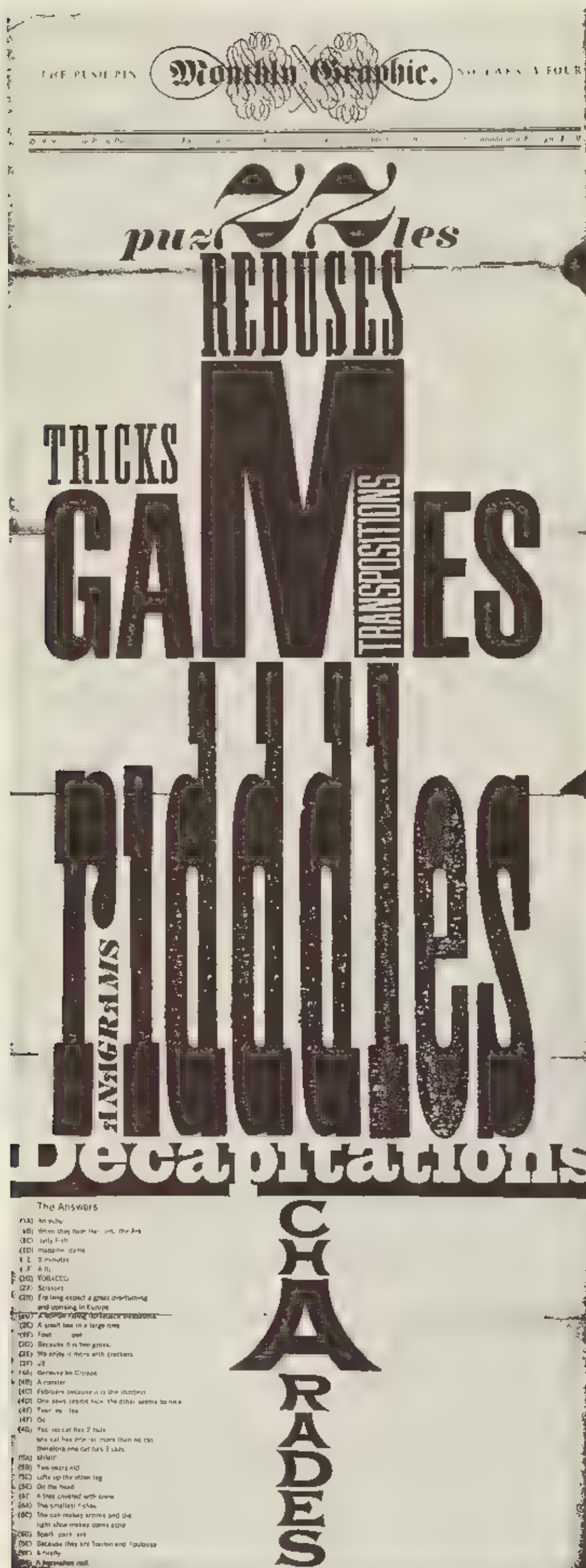


Figure 22  
Poster 'The Push Pin Monthly Graphic'  
No. Twenty Four The Push Pin Studios, 1959

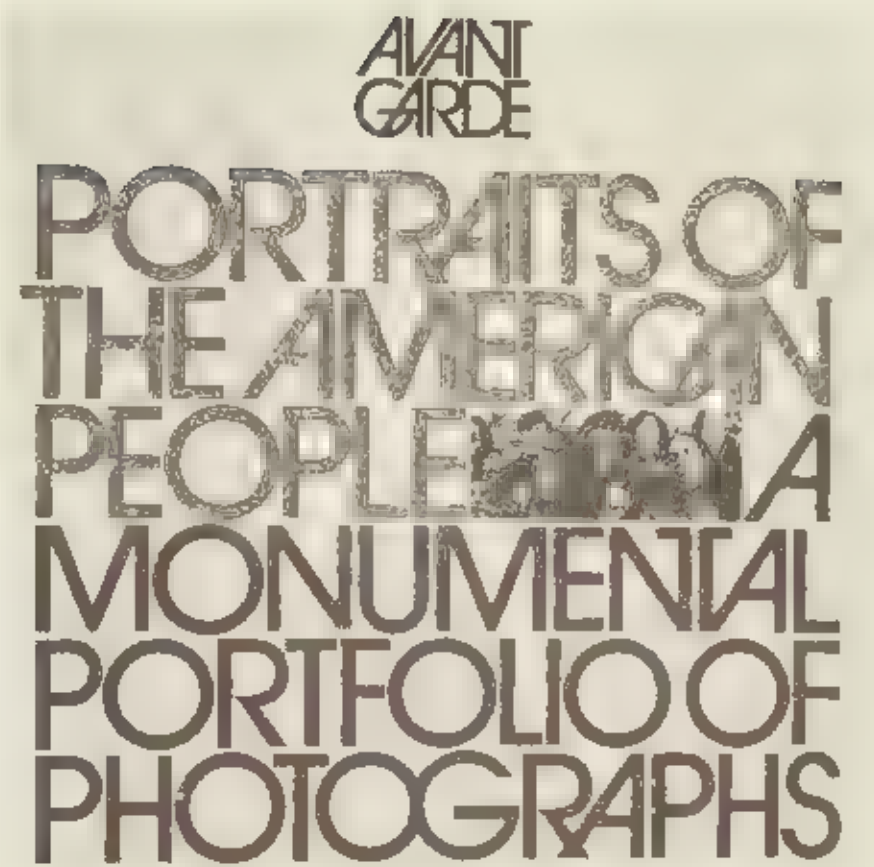


Figure 23  
Cover 'Avant Garde' Herb Luban 1960



Figure 24  
Advertisement 'Pubblica Depero'  
Fortunato Depero 1927



approaches exemplified by Herb Lubalin's photo typography in which he conceptually weds letter forms with images. In the mid-1960s *Avant Garde* magazine became the bible of this unique typographic approach [ *figure 23* ].

While no formal peace accord has yet been signed (and it's been reported that sniper fire could be still heard at last fall's *Fuse* conference in London), the recent hostilities appear to be evolving into a more fundamental debate about design criticism and academic versus professional practice. Nevertheless, Modernism is a casualty of this war that must be cared for. While it served well as straw dog against which the new alternatives could be contrasted, its legacy should not be regarded simply as a bankrupt establishment ideology. Before we forget the historical relevance and contemporary influence of Modernism, the time has come to reconcile the similarities between this venerable ethic and progressive contemporary practice.

In "On Overcoming Modernism" (*ID Magazine*, Sept/Oct 1992), Lorraine Wild argues, "The influence of Modernism on American graphic designers may have originated in the work of the European Futurists or the Constructivists or the designers of the Bauhaus, but the social utopianism of the aesthetic that accompanied early Modernism never reached the United States. Indulging in sloppy thinking, fake history and romance, we attribute a fantasy of ethical accomplishment to Modernism as a reaction against the uncomfortable unknowns of Postmodernism."

This statement is a critical exaggeration in the attempt to debunk Modernist mythology by recasting it as corrupted, and by extension suggesting its exponents are poseurs. The truth is that Modernism was fraught with contradiction from the outset, but that's what gave it breadth. Modernism evolved from its original utopian guise of making the industrial world a better place to live into its post-war functional role of making the industrial world clean and sanitized. The ideal of "the universal," as proffered in the late 1940s by the Swiss, girded by rules and strictures, ultimately became inflexible. But despite its catechism, Modernism did not begin as an all-encompassing ideology rooted in art and design, but rather as a confluence of progressive ideas that more or less attempted to reflect and mediate the radical changes in politics, society, technology, and economy that faced European industrial nations between the world wars. When it was finally adopted in the United States ten years after its beginnings in Europe, Modernism was no longer the radical experimental language of design school teachers and students practiced at the Bauhaus and Vkhutemas, but a codified form language of commercial art. Even in its experimental context it was intended for commercial application. The unconventional typography of Italian Futurist Fortunato Depero [ *figure 24* ], Bauhaus master Herbert Bayer, *Merz* master Kurt Schwitters, Russian Productivists Alexandr Rodchenko and Lazar El Lissitzky, and others in the pantheon of early Modernism, were applied to commercial advertising and packaging. They may have had a loftier mission, but for their "clients," these were not utopian messages.

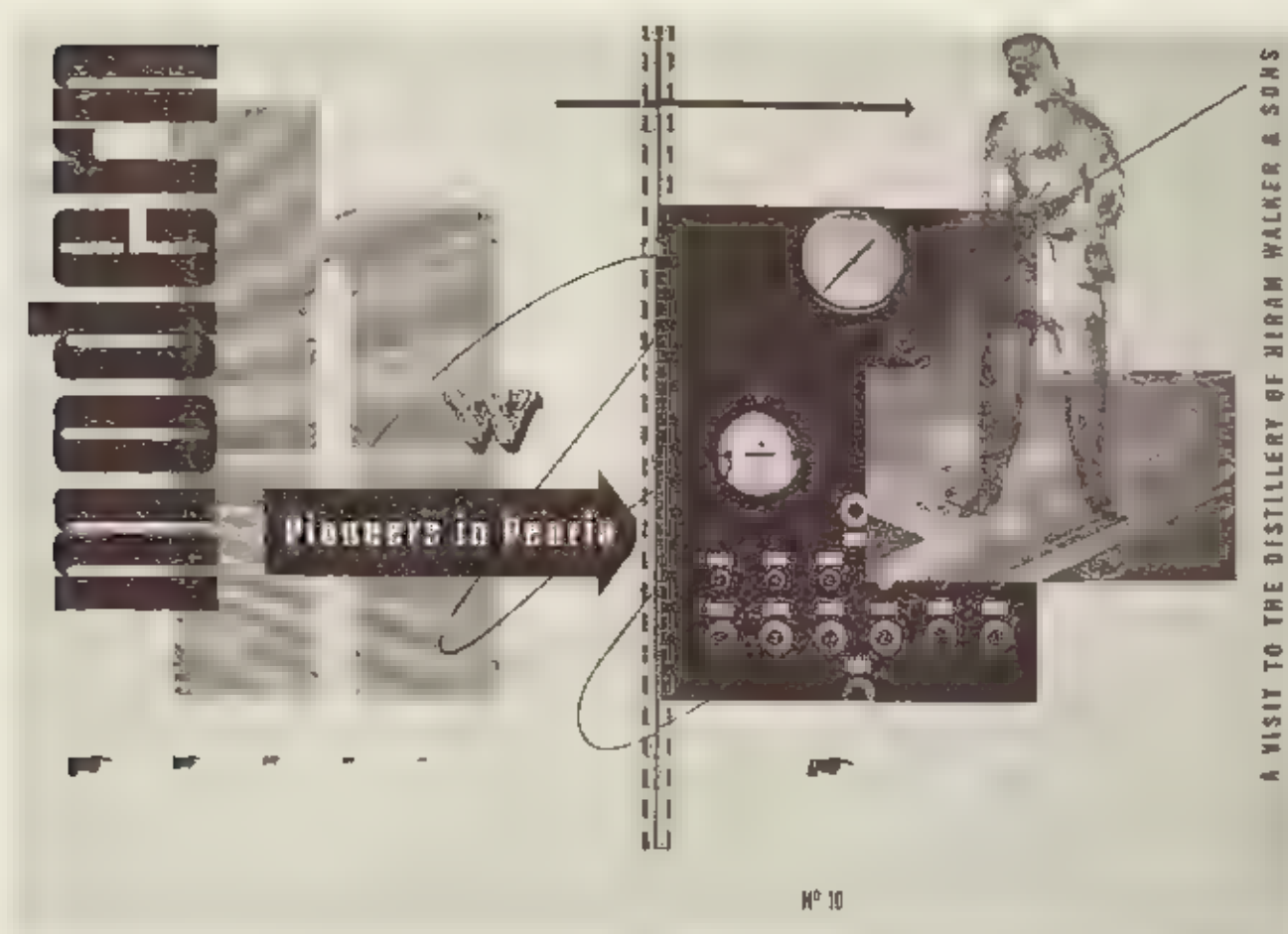




[Figure 25]  
Paul Rand cover *Direction*, "Art & Industry," 1941



[Figure 26]  
Ladislav Sutnar, cover *Design and paper*, 1943



[Figure 27]  
Lester Beall ad for Hiram Walker & Son, 1938



Modernism was introduced to Americans as a bridge between art and commerce; a tool in the retooling of the American economy. It did not come neatly packaged in formal art history books (which virtually ignored Modernism at the time), but rather was advanced in the late 1920s and early 1930s advertising trade magazines and layout manuals that provided templates for the modernization of word and image. Its theoretical base was all but ignored by its enthusiastic acolytes. Although pure utopianism was removed from Modernism when it was clear that Europe was surging headlong toward dystopia, nevertheless the *symbolism* of social change remained fixed. For American practitioners, Modern design did not signal a classless society, but it did rebel against stodgy convention. And so in the hands of its pioneers it was every bit as confrontational as the Postmodern methods of today.

After seeing the first examples of Bauhaus work in a 1928 issue of the British *Commercial Art* magazine, a young Paul Rand was one of the few who appreciated the theoretical underpinnings of this method and embraced Modernism not as novelty, but as a viable alternative to the saccharine, copy-heavy, overly stylized graphic art that was being pumped out in ads, packages, and magazines. Here was a chance to bust cliché through the marriage of Modern art and rational design. Rand saw Modern graphics as the print equivalent of jazz; while rooted in theories that redefined the nature of harmony and balance, Modernism allowed considerable room for unique and varied impromptu interpretation, as his conceptually exciting covers for *Direction* magazine attest [ *figure 25* ]. He further incorporated aspects of Modern theory — Cubist, Neo-Plasticist, Constructivist — into advertising and editorial work. Harnessing abstraction as a means for conveying messages was another radical accomplishment in a commercial art field based on hardsell techniques. While never resolutely Bauhausian, Constructivist, or Futurist, Rand synthesized the key avant garde theories into an applied arts language that through his force of will and vision pushed the boundaries of anonymous commercial art into the realm of authored "visual communications."

That is the real legacy of Modernism.

But American Modernism has nevertheless suffered its share of false expectations based on its ethical precept to make the world a better place. Sure, its adoption by corporations suggested that any similarity between Modernism and utopianism was purely vestigial. But it's ridiculous to think that Modernism could ever sustain the moral high ground in a field that is ultimately a service to commerce, although those who practiced it tried their best. By the 1950s, Modernism had been transformed from an ideology into a methodology — Corporate Modernism — where integrated systems replaced *ad hoc* practices. But even in this incarnation, Modernism broke ground by insisting that graphic design could relieve the chaos and confusion that existed in most communications. In the days when chaos and confusion reigned, simplicity and organization were radical concepts. But even in visual economy, there was an exquisite complexity, as Ladislav Sutnar proved through his meticulous, yet graphically



adventurous, industrial catalogues [ *figure 26* ]. Likewise the most innovative results of the rational revolution — pure typographic systems devised by the likes of Rudolph DeHarak, Brownjohn, Chermayeff & Geismar, Lester Beall [ *figure 27* ], and others — signaled a significant shift in the status quo.

Even in its most synthetic, minimalist, or functional state, Modernism's most audacious practitioners experimented with how to expand the range of visual communication, from transparent to multileveled. In addition to refining typography, these researchers looked towards the *big idea* or how to make diverse graphic forms including photographs, illustration, collage, etc. as comprehensible as written language. Aaron Burns, type director of the Composing Room in the late 1950s and later, in the early

1970s, co-founder of International Typeface Corporation, produced a series of experimental booklets published in 1961 that allowed Gene Federico, Lester Beall, Brownjohn, Chermayeff & Geismar [ *figure 28* ], and Herb Lubalin the opportunity to intuitively and intellectually play with hot metal type in ways that had never been tried before, such as touching and smashing letters, overprinting color combinations, and exploring levels of transparency, and otherwise expressing meaning through the form of type. The results were certainly comparable, at least in spirit, to the earliest Deconstructivist exercises in which multiple typefaces and weights at various

leadings tore apart the traditional Swiss grid. As experiments, they were both admired by those who sought new means of expression and criticized by those who saw no reason to tamper with convention. In the end, however, technology altered the practice of design and the thinking behind it, and today these experiments appear tame. But in their day they influenced a generation of editorial and advertising designers.

Modernism ran out of steam over a decade ago. But at its core is an ethic — the responsibility that a designer has to actively contribute to, indeed enhance, the social, political, and cultural framework — that continues to inform even the most diehard Post-modernist. Now that the recent generational war is coming to a close, it would be prudent to reassess, and even reappraise, the breadth of Modernism and the complexity of its leaders. The fact is, it's foolish to deny that anyone who seriously explores the outer limits and inner soul of visual communication is not in some way a Modernist. Or as Pogo's Walt Kelley said: "We have met the enemy and it is us."



(Figure 28)  
Chermayeff & Geismar,  
*That New York*  
1961.



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## Slogans High and Low

By Joe Clark

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[Figure 29]  
Jenny Holzer, Dupont Circle, Washington, D.C., 1985

Figure 30  
Barbara Kruger, book cover, *Remote Control*,  
The MIT Press, 1993



It's been a good ten years for text fanatics. Those of us who hanker for a world in which visual art contains not merely pictures but words have had our dreams come true, or at least a *glimmer* of dreams coming true. Through their work, Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer showed that words and images, or words alone, could be taken seriously as art. What these artists may not have expected is that their work would quickly become part of the everyday graphical landscape — the same landscape Kruger and Holzer were playing with, and satirizing, from the outset.

"I LIKED HER BETTER BEFORE SHE SOLD OUT"

Let's zoom back a decade or so and reminisce about how radical it was to find Jenny Holzer's "truisms," phrases like ABUSE OF POWER COMES AS NO SURPRISE and PROTECT ME FROM WHAT I WANT, "spontaneously" appearing on airport luggage carousels, on signs outside Cæsar's Palace, or in Times Square [ *figure 29* ]. Of course, there was nothing spontaneous about them at all. It wasn't just the anti-authoritarian message of the slogans that made them art, and it wasn't just the fact that these "serious" words were interspersed bathetically between advertisements which, conventional wisdom has it, are a debased form of communication. The extensive planning and arm-twisting (remember, these are privately owned signs she worked with) that Holzer put into her truisms removed any doubt that they might be sign programming "mistakes." (Of course, that might not be apparent if one ran across these truisms unexpectedly.) The content of her truisms, their novel and sometimes startling juxtapositions, and their sheer deliberateness, helped elevate Holzer's truisms to that exalted category, Art.

Then there was Barbara Kruger. Building on her experience in producing advertising photo layouts (and perhaps inspired by J. Pésci's book of 1930s photo-based ads, *Photo und Publizität* [Basel, Switzerland: Wiese Verlag AG, 1989]), Kruger slapped Futura Bold Italic slogans on top of old photographs of the sort a smart modern viewer would find ironic or kitschy [ *figure 30* ]. (My fave is a close-up of a ventriloquist's dummy with the message *When I hear the word culture, I take out my checkbook.*) Kruger's pictures looked something like advertising and, in their content, actively worked *against* what Kruger saw as the sexist paradigms of advertising, but what's just as important is the way they staked out a graphical territory of their own: With simple photos, no blurbs, no ad copy, no explanatory text, or no copyright lines, and above all with a consistent typography, you could spot a Krugerism a mile away.

If you happened to be the kind of person who thrived on the ironies of modern life, and if you had at least an inkling of awareness of gender relations and who controls what in the real world (call it "politics" if you like), the work of Holzer and



#### FOLLOW THE BOUNCING BALL, 90s-STYLE

Text queens who also dig music videos have a way to combine those passions. Closed-captioned music videos. Yes, that's "captioned" as in "for deaf viewers," and no, you don't have to be deaf to enjoy them. In fact, hearing viewers have something of an advantage. You can follow audio and textual tracks simultaneously, and if the video itself includes typography, the fun is that much greater.

Closed-captioning is a system of transmitting encoded captions along with a conventional TV picture. The caption codes reside on a line of the TV picture just above the visible area (it's Line 21, Field 1, in case you're curious). You need a decoder to turn the captions into visible words. Since July 1993, all TVs manufactured for sale in the U.S. with screens 13 or larger have been required to carry decoder chips as standard equipment. (You can still buy old style external caption decoders.) Those built-in decoders, along with some external models, meet fancy new technical standards and are capable of super-cool typographic feats — various colors, blinking, animation, scrolling, and the like — using a single font that tends to vary by TV manufacturer and model. But by industry consensus, those advanced features aren't scheduled to be fully phased in until 2002.

What are we stuck with in the meantime? An embarrassment of riches, really: Captioned videos from nearly every major U.S. record label using an already good enough

Kruger spoke to you. It spoke even more loudly if you thought even the crude dot-matrix typography of LEDs held graphic design potential that few people were actively using.

But Holzer and Kruger might not have banked on what, in hindsight, should have been a logical outcome their work: Far from considering advertising as a near-Orwellian Big Business intrusion, a lot of people rather like advertising. Technology has brought the subtleties of typography into the hands of the masses. And over the last couple of years, those facts have conspired to gut Holzer's truisms and Kruger's pictures of most of the meaning and impact they used to have. In Kruger's case, that turned out OK, because other artists have followed in her social commentary footsteps; in Holzer's case, the outcome was not as benign.

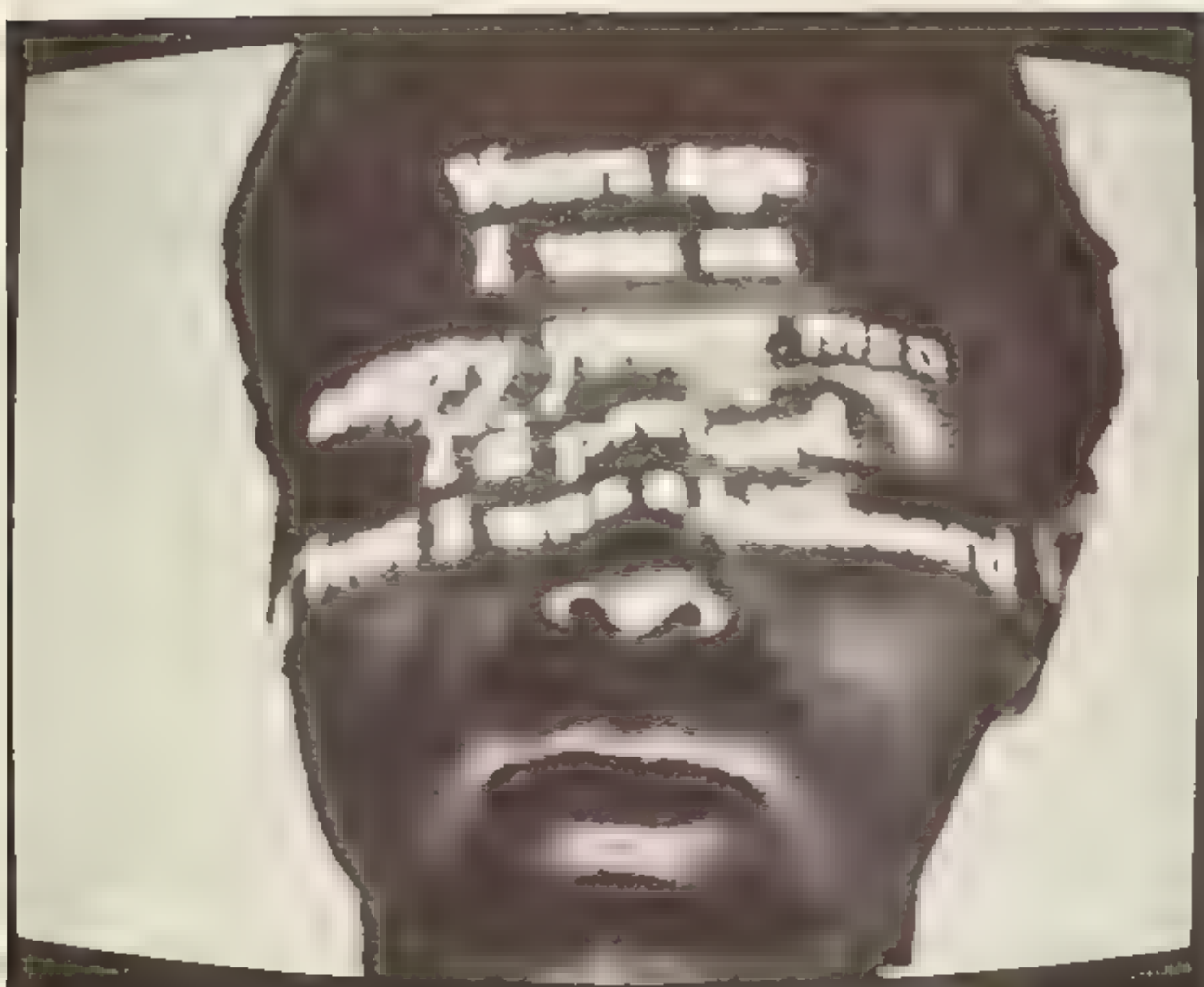
#### TRICKLE-DOWN THEORY

Let's start with the infiltration of Barbara Kruger-like word/image pairings into day-to-day life. Kruger isn't an elitist. Her work was exhibited in galleries and fetched the usual high prices that gallery art does, and that's fine; everyone has to make a living. But Kruger has taken deliberate steps to popularize her work. Kate Linker's oversized Kruger hagiography *Love for Sale* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1990) shows canvas shopping bags emblazoned with Kruger's single most famous slogan, *I shop therefore I am*. "I'm not just a consumer," these bags exclaim, "I know I am, and I like it!"

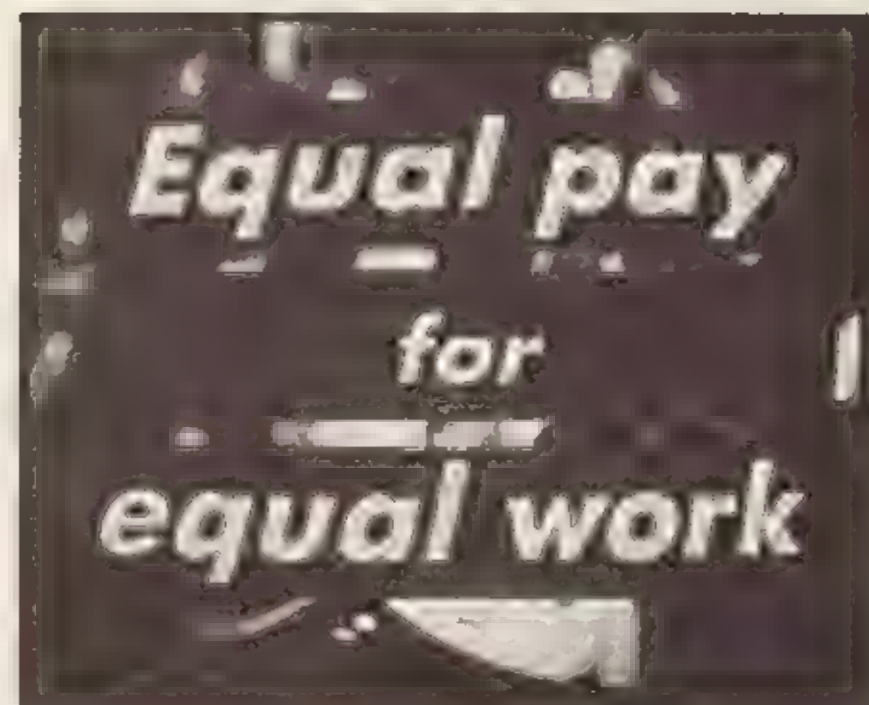
Or consider Kruger's famous poster for the 1989 March on Washington for reproductive rights. *Your body is a battleground*, the poster screamed in white type on red bars laid over a black-and-white woman's face, half of it solarized. Plastered all over New York and clearly playing to an audience that recognized Kruger's work, the poster was something of a departure for her in that it promoted an identifiable event, offered body copy at the bottom of the poster, and even sported a discreet little byline (still in Futura Italic, natch) in the upper-left corner. The poster goes to show that you can take the artist out of advertising, but you can't always take the advertising out of the artist.

Or look at Kruger's cover for a 1993 *Newsweek* issue illustrating a story on "family values" (screaming cover headline: *Whose family? Whose values?*). Actively commissioned by *Newsweek* and actively designed by Kruger, the cover was undercut to a certain extent by the layout of the story it referred to, a pastiche of Kruger typography, executed by *Newsweek* layout minions, which a tiny credit described as being "in the style of Barbara Kruger." (She later commented that *Newsweek* didn't ask permission to engage in these graphic shenanigans, but that she didn't mind much anyway.)





[Figure 31]  
Talking Heads "Nothing But Flowers"  
Directed by M&Co  
Warner



[Figure 32]  
Vanessa Williams "Work To Do"  
Directed by Pam Thomas  
Mercury/Polygram



technology. The floodgates opened for captioned videos back in '89, when the hard-of-hearing daughter of American record producer Ed Stasium complained that she was being shut out of her daddy's work. A few phone calls later, Stasium, then working on Living Colour's *Vivid*, had convinced Columbia Records to send the video "Cult of Personality" to the New York office of the Caption Center, an arm of Boston PBS Überstation WGBH that's known for its well-executed captions. Since then, the Geffen empire and a few big-name rap indies have been about the only holdouts in captioning; most other labels caption most everything they produce.

The goal in captioning a video is to represent every word that's sung or spoken therein. (Editing lyrics is verboten for copyright reasons.) But captions have to be transmitted before they can be displayed, and at a piddling two characters per second, sometimes the barrage of words will bump up against the speed limit of caption transmission. So you'll occasionally see the lyrics of backup singers uncaptioned or only intermittently captioned, or (here's the fun part) captioned in conjunction with the main singing — two threads of captions on the screen simultaneously.

It's in cases like those that highly-literate hearing-captioning viewers can get the most from the experience. Imagine: You're listening to the lyrics and the music and following the video itself and reading the captions as they are displayed more or less in time with the music. Despite what you may have been

*Newsweek's* emulation of "the style of Barbara Kruger" was merely the most blatant example of a then-emerging trend: desktop publishing, not to mention the availability of every imaginable variant of Futura and nearly any other font you could hanker for, now makes it possible to duplicate Kruger's style. (I did it in a music column I write for a local Toronto paper: I headlined a section of capsule record reviews with *Buy me, I'll change your life!* — an actual Krugerism — in reversed-out Futura Extra Bold Italic.) You don't even need fancy equipment, since at 72 point or larger, even an el-cheapo 300-dpi laser printer will produce results good enough for anything but a Kate Linker book.

DTP also brought Kruger-like text to music video to a notable extent. Using page layout software, it was easy to typeset words in-house, which you could then matte into a televised frame. And the ubiquity of PostScript fonts for conventional printing also expanded the repertoire of fonts available for TV character generators. It's par for the course these days to find character-generator manufacturers on the list of ITC licensees, for example, and most of the old-standby fonts, including Futura, are available.

So guess what happened? Directors started using text in their videos more and more — and in ways that directly descend, for good or ill, from Kruger's sensibility. Consider typographic videos of the pre-Kruger era like R.E.M.'s "Fall on Me" and Talking Heads' "Nothing But Flowers." Both used type as part of the narrative — not quite captioning the lyrics, but representing and playing with the words themselves [figure 31]. In contrast, watch Vanessa Williams' 1991 video "Work to Do" and you'll find a runway model setting overlaid with titles saying *Don't threaten me with love, Equal pay for equal work, Busy waiting*, and (coincidence?) *Your body is a battleground* [figure 32]. Guess which font they're in? And guess what colors?

This video doesn't exactly offer the most trenchant social commentary by any means (a glamorous, if dethroned, Miss America complaining that "I got work to do"? Equal pay for equal work, indeed!), but it's evidence of the wholesale consumption of Kruger's slogans by popular culture. If they work in videos, they work anywhere.

But presumably Kruger's approach of using pithy ad-like maxims can withstand some tinkering, in the way that drag queens so often do a better Joan Rivers or Aretha Franklin than the original. I'd say there are two primo examples of upping the slogan ante: Information Society's zippy and clever "Peace & Love Inc." [figure 33] and Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy's languid and clever "Television, the Drug of the Nation." Both songs deal with consumerism and refuge from the real world (quothe Information Society: "If you want to believe in something, believe in us 'cause we make it easy"), and both videos, directed by onscreen-text lover Mark Pellington, use TV and product stand-ins to make the point.



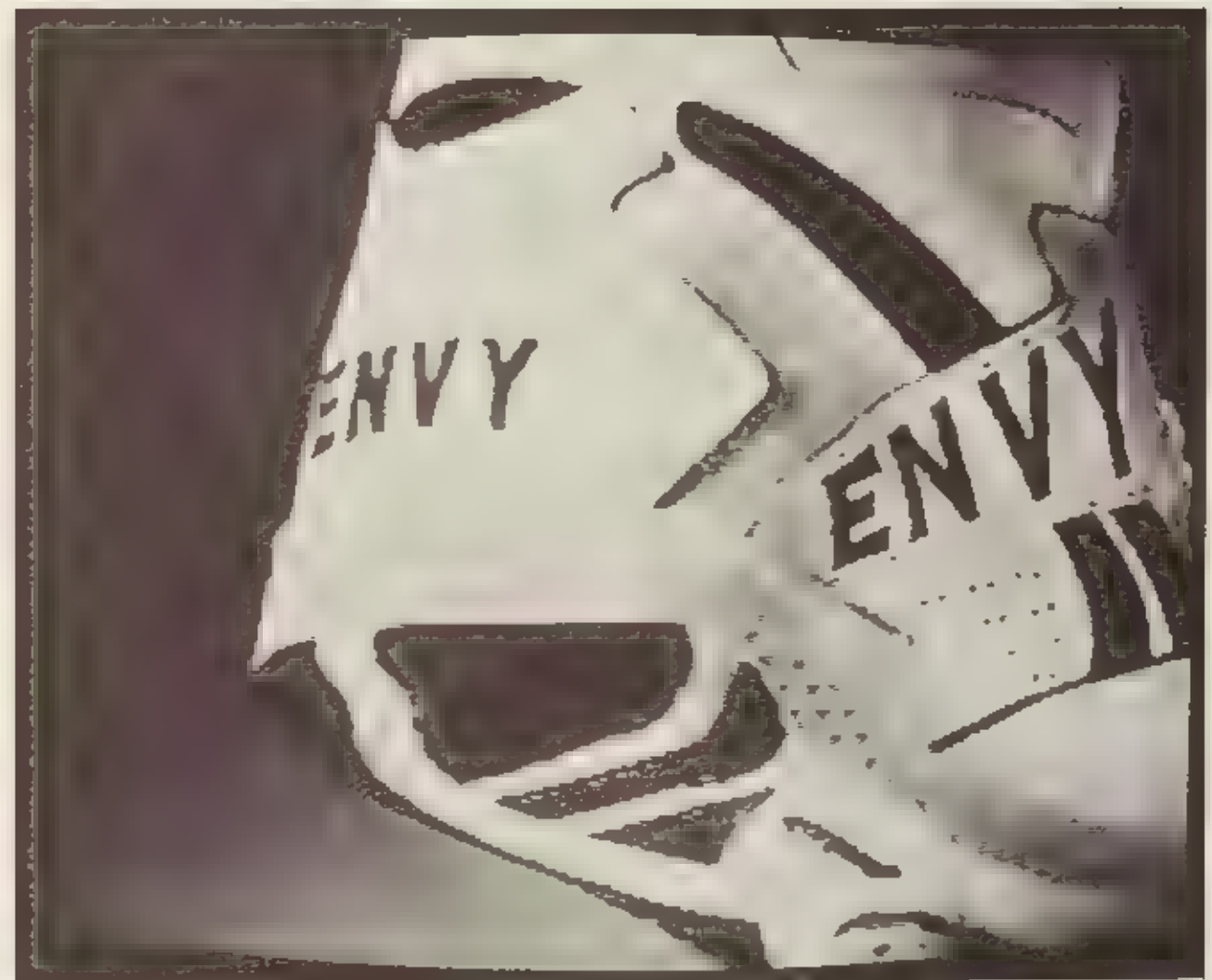


Figure 33  
Information Society "Peace & Love Inc."  
Directed by Mark Pellington  
Reprise/Warner Music



led to believe — hearing people have been conditioned for the last ten years to reject captions as "distracting," which is why they're closed in the first place — it is possible to follow all those stimuli at once without problems. It takes a bit of practice, but after a couple of weeks of watching all kinds of programming with captions on, you'll be accustomed to the multi-modal sensation of watching, listening, and reading.

Captions cannot shine shit. They cannot rehabilitate an uninteresting or slipshod song or video. Nor, conversely, can lousy captions distract from a good or excellent video despite the captions' lousiness. But for the broad middle range of OK videos with OK captions, the latter certainly does enhance the former for literate hearing viewers. And those rare gems known as "typographic videos" up the ante even more, since you can then follow the onscreen type, the action of the video (which may itself involve typography, as in signage), the captions, the music, and the lyrics.

Unfortunately, typographic videos are few and far between, and only a handful have been captioned — R.E.M.'s "Everybody Hurts" [figure A] and Van Halen's "Right Now" are the prime examples of captioned typographic videos, though oddball Canadian band King Cobb Steelie's "Triple Oceanic Experience" [figure B] was subjected to typically lousy Canadian captions in fall '94. The grandparent of them all Talking Heads's "Nothing But Flowers," remains uncaptioned, as are R.E.M.'s "Fall on Me" and some lesser titles. While captioned videos can be

"Peace & Love Inc." manages to use silver lamé and overexposure cleverly in themselves, but those effects really stand out in contrast with the sequences interspersed in the video that show, on the one hand, simple white signs with Futura type (Bold Condensed this time) and, on the other hand, beauty shots of fake products straight out of a Procter & Gamble commercial. "YOU ARE A PRODUCT," "THE REVOLUTION WILL BE TAPED," "BE real," "ACQUIRE real," "WE'LL PROTECT YOU FROM LONELINESS" — these are more Krugery than Kruger herself (though some do contain Holzery overtones).

I'd be more than happy to buy the featured Shame toothpaste, Guilt soap, Envy sneakers, and especially Family Values toilet paper at the local supermarket — and I'd tote them home in my *I shop therefore I am* reusable canvas shopping bag. The product references themselves (you'll find more of the same in George Michael's 1993 video "Killer [Papa Was a Rolling Stone]") play off expectations of what the products will do for us and the paradigms of TV advertising, but the slogans themselves hoe the row Kruger sowed.

It's more of the same with "Television, the Drug of the Nation," though in that video there are *way* more channels (so to speak) of information coming your way. The main graphic action consists of TV snippets, pills with names like SEX and ADDICT, closeups of vocalist Michael Franti and musician Rono Tse, and handmade let's-etch-some-lines-into-the-film-stock special effects. The text stream comes from interspersed slogans, obviously typeset or even Letraset on paper (oh, the nostalgia!) and set in a very '70s loose Helvetica style, saying "television is the new GOD," "my mind is being massaged," "I WANT THE TRUTH/I WATCH THE LIES," "junkie," "drug," "sleep." You can also see those slogans on monitors behind Franti and Tse, so wherever you look, it's a barrage [figure 34].

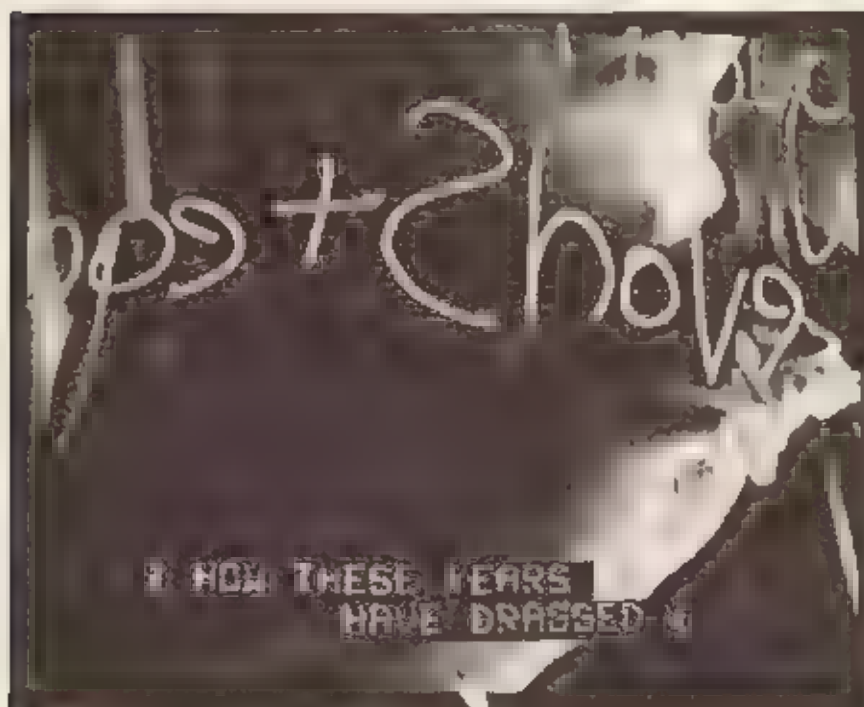
Maybe I'm hyper aware of these multiple parallel streams of information (a *real* "multichannel universe"), but that's what I, for one, want from television. I want it to be nonlinear and multitrack. I want acting and relevant sound and visual effects and audio and text, and I want text especially to be magnified beyond its typical usage. Show me a Barbara Kruger poster or magazine cover or "artwork" and I'll understand it well enough. I'll probably even like it and stick it up on my wall. But it's not going to engage me as much as, say, a music video with parallel audio and video and adjunct textual information.

I'm not calling for *Masterpiece Theater* and *The Simpsons* to incorporate Krugerisms into the narrative, and I don't want the only available media to be textual music videos with social commentary; I like books, magazines, newspapers, records, films, and computer software too. But considering how many people watch music videos, many of whom do so with their minds switched off (or, in the case of

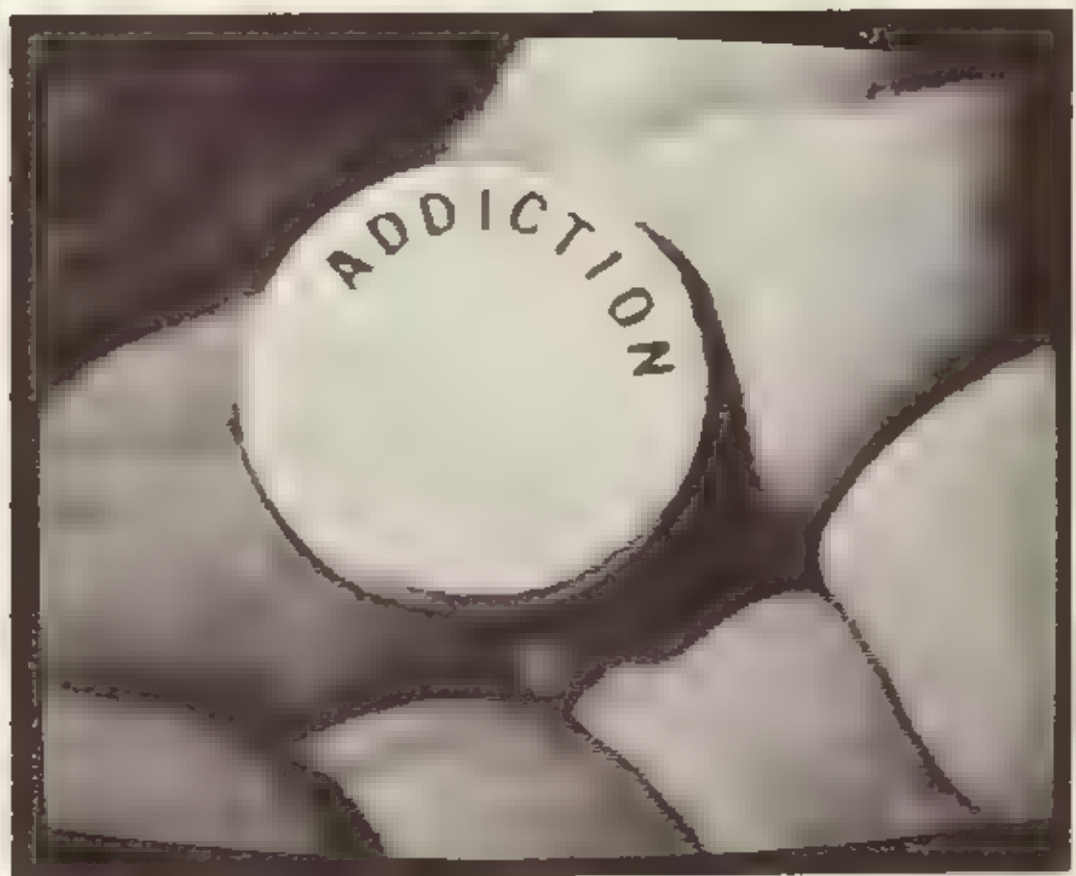
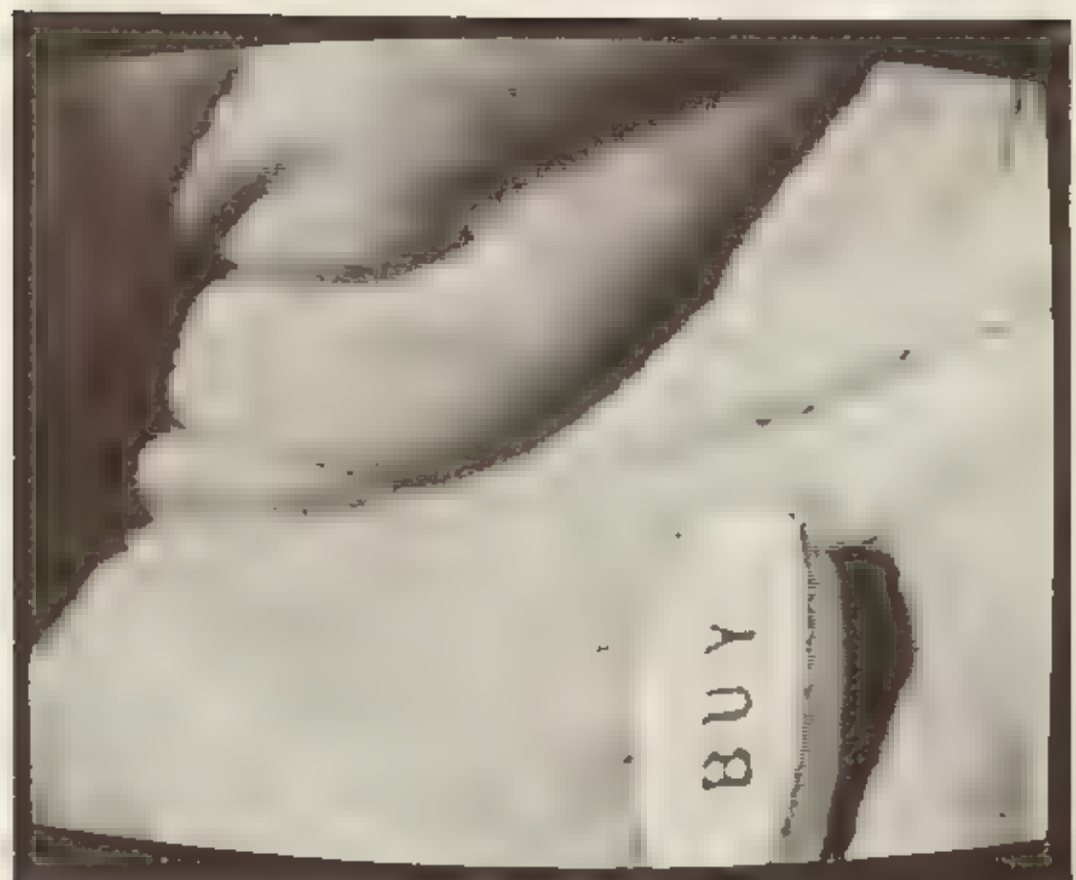




[Figure A]  
R E M , "Everybody Hurts."  
Directed by Jake Scott  
Warner



[Figure B]  
King Cobb Steells, "Triple Oceanic Experience"  
Directed by Kevin Lynne and Kim Derko  
Lunamoth/EMI



[Figure 34]  
The Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy, "Television the Drug of the Nation"  
Directed by Mark Pellington  
Island/A&M



seen in the U.S. and Canada (though not very often there, since Canadian branch offices of U.S. labels are generally incapable of getting a captioned dub of a video into Canada), they're a virtually unknown concept in other countries. In the first place, not all industrialized nations have captioning systems; the systems that do exist are generally incompatible. Captioning is not as well developed, popular, or culturally ingrained outside of North America as inside; for example, it's been only within the last two years that U.K. advertisers have been captioning their TV commercials, while captioned commercials have been a major cash cow for U.S. and Canadian captioners since day zero.

If there aren't captioned videos where you live, even though a captioning technology is in place, push for change. A few powerful directors, artists, or record-label personnel might be all it takes to get the local industry in the habit of captioning videos. Sure, they're of immense value to deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers, who after all have as much of a right to enjoy all aspects of popular culture as hearing people, but captioned videos are also a source of artistic interest in themselves.

- JOE CLARK -

programming on U.S. MTV, switched off for them), throwing more tracks of information at viewers can only benefit them, giving them all the more grist for the media mill that churns away in the modern mind.

Perhaps I'm being presumptuous, or at least optimistic. Maybe it's only people with quite low and quite high levels of literacy — the ends of the bell curve — who would benefit from that kind of visual parallelism, though admittedly for different reasons (literacy in the former group, linguistic thrills in the latter). The broad middle ground of viewers may end up resenting what some might deem a visual cacophony. And the fact that another massively promoted massively parallel artwork, Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers*, played to a few art-film acolytes and almost no one else does not fill me with hope.

But even for that broad middle ground, the more commentary to which viewers are exposed — even if the commentary deals with "unimportant" topics like consumer products and television viewing — the more they are apt to get used to seeing it and to thinking of events and media beyond their face value. Show someone with half a brain a "commercial" that "advertises" a deodorant called Morality, and that person will be apt to question *real* deodorants, and ad campaigns for them, from that point onward. This questioning may not lead to an out-and-out rejection of consumer lifestyles (or lead to that consumer's avoidance of whatever latterday ill you may wish to pin on deodorants and deodorant ads), but that's more than you can reasonably expect anyway. What it *will* do is cause that person to think; exactly *what* they think is, at root, none of our business.

The kind of analysis multitrack videos offer is still very new and is second nature only to a rarefied group of intellectuals, but over time, throwaway cultural products like sloganeering music videos might just enhance people's ability to think critically.

#### MEANWHILE, BACK AT THE PIXELBOARD

Jenny Holzer's truisms have not trickled down to Joe and Jane Citizen the way Kruger's slogans have. You can chalk that up to the fact that Holzer's truisms tend to be freestanding; they don't rely on a linkage with some product or photo. Since there are so many opportunities these days to hijack photos of products and slap a "subversive" slogan on them (photos and DTP type are easy to come by), Kruger's approach has a practical advantage.

Besides, Holzer has branched out herself in the last few years to cut her truisms into stone benches and marble floors. Having played, to use the show-biz terminology, most every form of electronic sign on earth the way Wayne Newton has played every lounge in Vegas, it made sense for Holzer to move on to something else.



Moreover, Holzer's electronic medium itself had become coin of the realm. These days LED and other programmable displays are so cheap that Chinese-food delivery cars carry them on the roof.

But in a couple of cases, Holzer's use of electronic signs to articulate the unexpected has been heisted by popular culture. In one case, Steve Martin's film *L.A. Story*, the results were subtle and intelligent; in the other, U2's ZooTV tour, the effect was craven and derivative. And unlike the percolation of Kruger's *modus operandi* into general consciousness, popularizing Holzer's approach hasn't led to better art, more clever commentary, or an expansion in the conception of the way information is communicated.

In *L.A. Story*, mild-mannered TV weather person Steve Martin finds himself out on one of Los Angeles's endless freeways when his car breaks down. Parked by the side of the road in the shadow of a huge electronic sign used to warn drivers of traffic conditions, road closures, and the like, Martin fumbles under the hood and mumbles to himself about his failing marriage and his tenuously held job. Then he notices the sign is (silently) talking to him, displaying words that could only relate to him and answering Martin's spoken questions, albeit with riddles.

And that's the endearing part of *L.A. Story*'s text metaphor: Martin has to come back to the sign over and over again to decode its riddles, which foreshadow the happiness he'll eventually find. The sign even speaks in *anagrams* at one point, and uses cool typographic effects — showering pixels, fonts and sizes, flashing type, animation — to get its point across. If you blink as you drive by you'll miss it, and the sign will look like any other electronic display (i.e., it will have *function* but not *meaning*). This discrepancy is fundamental to Holzer's sign-based work. It's interesting that a utilitarian electronic sign suddenly declares *ABUSE OF POWER COMES AS NO SURPRISE* because it's not *supposed* to say that. *L.A. Story* builds on that technique of juxtaposition with grace, affection, and charm.

Quite the opposite was true of U2's 1992 ZooTV tour, which featured not only large video screens on-stage (where Bono, wielding a remote control, dialed up cable and satellite channels and once jacked into a live two-way feed from war-torn Sarajevo), but a bevy of electronic displays, too. One such display was even attached to the side of a Trabant — those kooky, outdated, quintessentially East German cars — that had been hoisted into the air. Throughout the concert these displays scrolled, popped up, or otherwise showed a range of truism-like phrases cooked up by *metteur-en-scène* Brian Eno, and no doubt also by that lexical luminary Bono [figure 35]. (Some truisms also made their way to the video screens, and some of those were close-ups of electronic displays!)

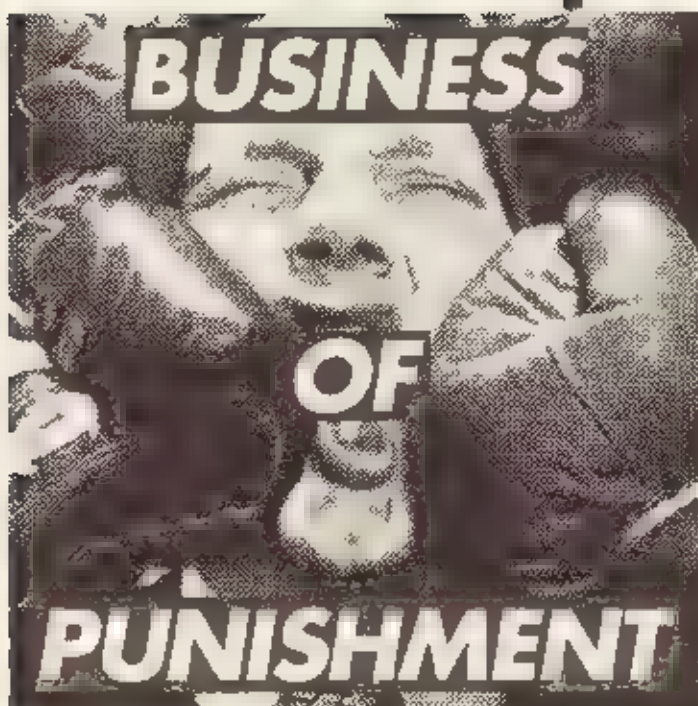
Not only were these pseudo-truisms thuddingly banal (WEAR A CONDOM;



AMBITION BITES THE NAILS OF SUCCESS; WATCH MORE TV), there was no mention of their direct antecedent, Jenny Holzer. Of course, Mark Pellington didn't explicitly credit Barbara Kruger in his own videos either. But in ZooTV, the contribution of AIDS activist/artist/writer David Wojnarowicz was explicitly credited. Just as Holzer didn't directly work on ZooTV, Wojnarowicz didn't do so either; his contribution was a video for U2's AIDS parable "One," shown at ZooTV concerts. But while Wojnarowicz got credited at the end of the show for his work and influence, Holzer didn't.

I'm keen on truisms when they stand apart from something, even if that something is only the background. But in ZooTV, truisms were simply another sort of kindling tossed onto the semiotic fire, all of which ended up burned to a crisp anyway, irrespective of the form they'd taken at the outset. Compare ZooTV's treatment of TV and truisms: U2 randomly zapped through available TV signals (so much for any message actually relating to the content), to the far smarter "Television, the Drug of the Nation" (set up by using violent imagery and spoken and typographic commentary). Likewise, U2 randomly cycled through pseudotruisms without meaning, apparently using the technique for its "cutting-edge, arty" feel and failing to thank the originator.

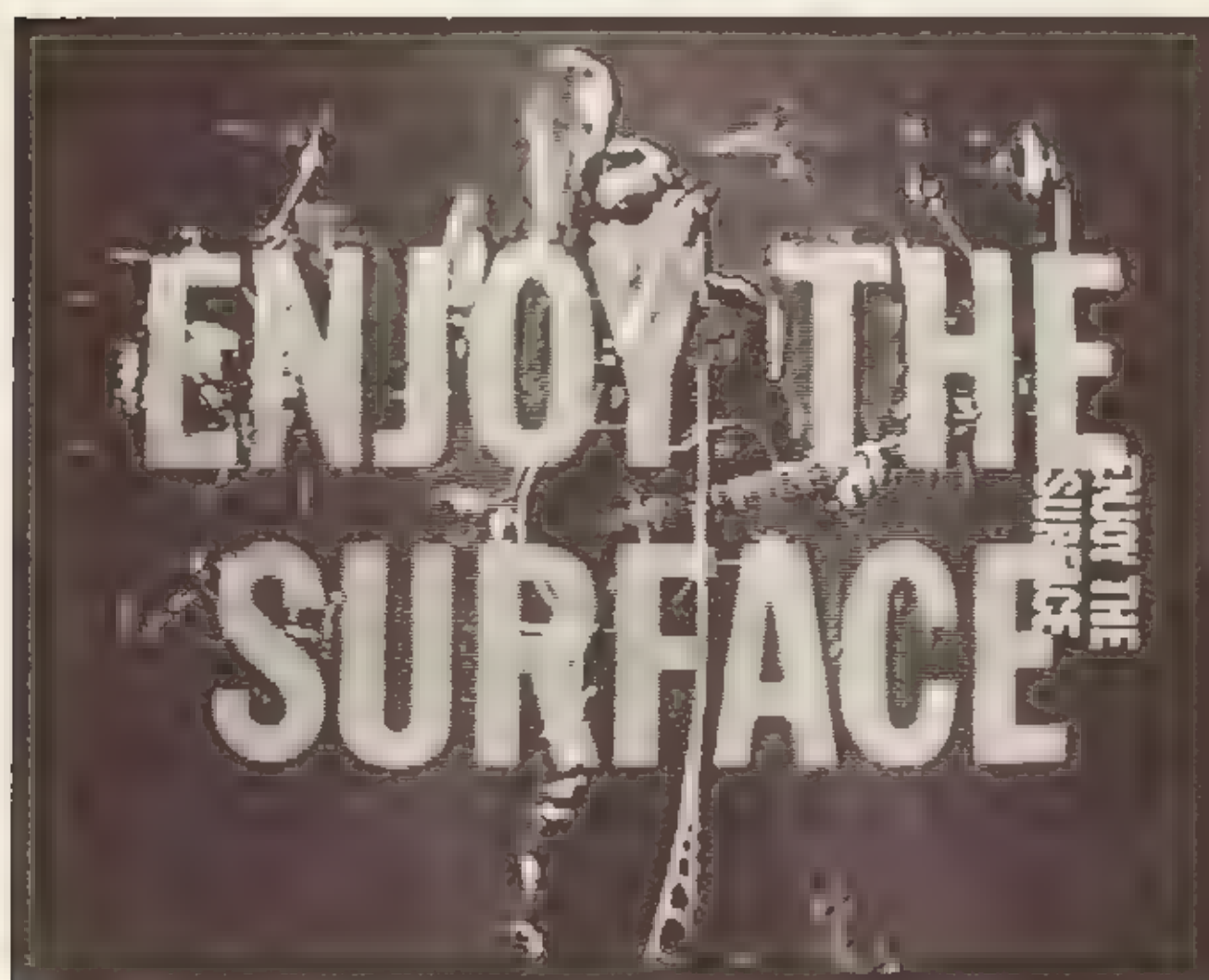
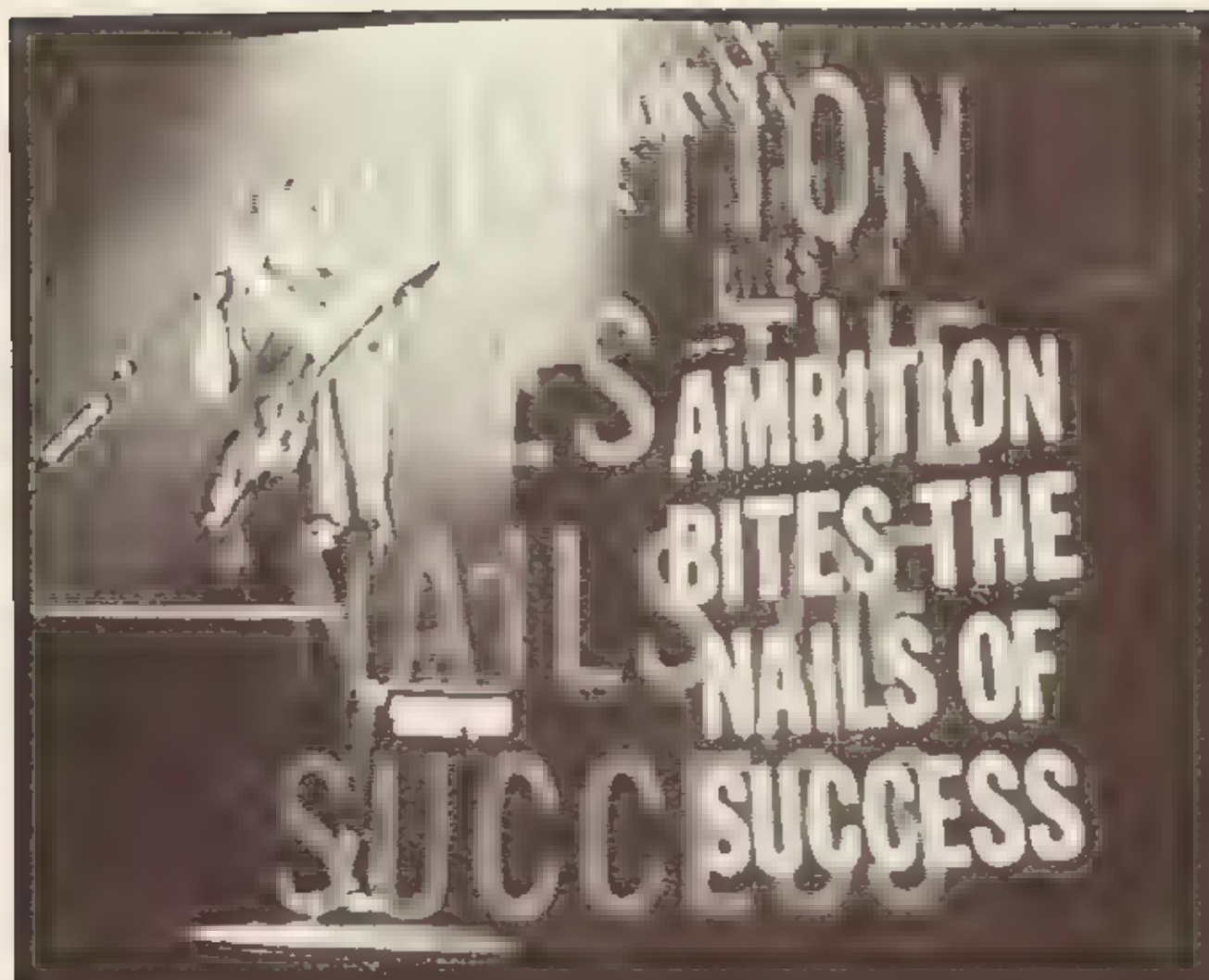
Maybe I'm just cranky because the trend toward appropriating Kruger's and Holzer's respective styles seems to have fizzled out. In 1993 I saw a new pseudo-Krugerism about once a month; in 1994 I saw only two: The cover art for Consolidated's album *Business of Punishment* [figure 36], which I initially thought was a knockoff but turned out to be a Krugerism actually created by Kruger, and Mötley Crüe's video "Hooligan's Holiday," which featured pseudo-Krugerisms plastered across the entire set and intercut with the action, not to mention Holzerian scrolling LED panels and lousy closed captions. Pseudo-Holzerisms were always harder to come by and also seem to have disappeared from sight altogether in the last year. So the Kruger/Holzer trend may well be dead. What can we look forward to in its place? Perhaps the democratizing effects of desktop publishing and the broader cultural presence of typography will lead to entirely (or subtly) different forms of parallel typography and social commentary. You can already see some innovation in the genre of typographic music videos, which the trend toward closed captioning of music videos (see sidebar) makes all the more trenchant. And it's not as though the culture as a whole won't be ready for whatever its artists, graphic designers, and directors come up with; all we need to do is keep our eyes open.



[Figure 36]  
CD Cover, Consolidated,  
*Business of Punishment*  
Designed by Barbara Kruger  
London Recordings

The research for this story was supported by a grant from the Ontario Arts Council. Toronto writer Joe Clark has been a typography queen for more than half his life. You can write him at 358 Danforth Ave., Box 65265, Toronto, Ontario M4K 3Z2; fax +1 416-406-416-4; E-mail: joeclark@kookup.net.





[Figure 35]  
U2, "Zoo (Live from Sydney)"  
Directed by David Mallet  
Polygram



## SCHOOL AND SHOPPING BAGS

EXPLAINING THE SILENCE OF  
THE PEOPLE AND THE  
HUMMING OF THE MACHINE

An essay in cause and effect  
relationships

by Dave Wofford

NOTE FROM AUTHOR: This essay was first written during my last semester at the School of Design at North Carolina State University where I graduated with an undergraduate degree in Environmental Design in May of 1994. This degree program is unique in this country in that it recognizes the value of allowing an individual to chart his or her own course of action in a diverse environment. This environment is composed of graphic design, architecture, landscape architecture, and industrial design departments, as well as design and art studios and courses offered by the Environmental Design department.

During my five years at the School of Design I took a wide variety of courses, including three graphic design studios and three typography courses.

After reading *Enigme* #31 with its emphasis on design education, I decided to send in this edit of my original essay.

This past fall it appeared once again as a studio project. For at least the third consecutive year, a group of students in their first level graphic design studio at N.C. State's School of Design were told to design a shopping bag. From the beginning, the student designers are trained to see design as an activity to help sell things; things to put in shopping bags, and, by extension and implication, to see themselves as designers, as things. *Things to be told what to do by others.*

The shopping bag acts as a perfect metaphor, both for our infatuation with things and for the act of consuming. Moreover, the student designer is also trained to see him or herself as something to be consumed.

As student designers, we are trained to become consumed with the idea of reification, the process of turning abstract ideas and concepts into things. Isn't the end of our projects always critiquing things up on a wall with the jurors evaluating them, like shoppers at the mall? Things on a wall are concrete and they bring a sense of closure to our effort. But, because the critique ends our project, this means our responsibility ends as soon as we put our thing up on the wall; as soon as we are consumed, we move on to the next assignment that is handed down. The consumption is never ending, responsibility for what is consumed is thrown away, *just like the shopping bag.*

The most important aspect of the shopping bag assignment is that students are conditioned to become submissive workers, to not concern themselves with the process of deciding what to design, to not be involved in collective situations of discourse and decision-making. Instead, they are trained to only be concerned with the product, the specific thing. This reductionistic nature of schooling results in student designers figuring out what is wanted, and never *why*, to a point that breeds action without purpose or understanding.

The most disheartening aspect of the shopping bag assignment and its countless clones is that this is what passes for education in the majority of the graphic design schools. The order-taking approach to assignments is the perfect way to condition people to become specialists with little interest in seeing situations from anything other than a self-serving perspective, and to see themselves as servants to whatever orders are handed down. Actions become empty because they are not built on understanding. What is understood is the authoritarian structure of the studio. Discussion rarely occurs and the studios are dominated by form exercises, games in which one does as one is told, and the continued development of designing things to help us become better. Better at what, though?

I question what, as students, are we doing? Why? What purpose does it serve? Where do these "problems" we solve come from? What does this address, whom does this serve? Is this the best possible approach? What other activities does this affect? What is this situation affected by? Does this really solve a problem or merely create a new one? These are questions rarely raised or discussed, and their absence tells students these are not things to be concerned with.

Instead, and this sadly is the biggest lesson learned in school, students are trained to see themselves as submissive workers for an authoritarian figure — first the teacher, then the client. This line of thinking shows how students are conditioned to become dependent on being consumed by others. The situation holds security for all because it always transfers responsibility away from all involved. After all, everyone is just doing their job. "The others" come up with the project, the designer merely comes up with the physical form.

The designer becomes a means to others' ends, but mistakenly sees the means as an end in itself because school has conditioned the designer to see situations from the self-serving perspective of a trained specialist, an expert in providing form. *A thing.*

As a result of the reductionistic process learned in school, students learn what classes to take, what skills to consider important, and how to look to others to tell them what to do. As a result, any hope of maintaining a sense of purpose is lost. Education becomes about herding cattle into the same line, enforcing blanket rules on a diverse range of people, and assuming this is what the students want (or rather what they need if one sees the mandated curriculum as a condescending "We know what's good for you"). This is essentially like a tunnel where the lack of options act as blinders, and the students are pushed to the end of the tunnel where they will "see the light."

It is school where we learn the code of conduct, the infamous "tricks of the trade." Because students are encouraged to see school not as part of the "real world," but as a training ground for the real stuff, involvement in school is rendered meaningless; it becomes a static ritual of jumping through hoops to please others. As a result, schools pump out many people who don't know how to approach new and different situations on their own. Instead, they do what they learned in school, they look to authority instead of using their own skills to figure out what to do. This passive approach to education, this schooling, keeps a majority of students from thinking about what they are being trained for.

Assignments like the shopping bag perpetuate this line of thinking and the narrow, preprofessional



curriculum prevents students from thinking in any way other than a child being told what to do. Consumer culture, more precisely Corporate Capitalism, rules the day, even rules the school. And because it rules the school, the result is our clockwork society, where the function the schools perform is to reproduce this society.

What puzzles and frustrates me is that some teachers use *Emigre*, *Eye*, and *AIGA* symposia and ethics conferences as stages from which to talk about how graphic design can work in "socially conscious ways." They go on about the evils of the *status quo*, with its emphasis on consumerism and how design education these days places such an emphasis on holistic, interdisciplinary approaches. Then, many of the teachers and administrators proceed to narrow the graphic design curriculum, treat students as property to be owned and contained inside the department, and train the students according to the influence exerted on schools by outside interests who want employees who know how to dress up things like shopping bags.

By making undergraduate graphic design education a pre-professional training program with its blanket policies and rules, the teachers and administrators make curriculum requirements based on the lowest common denominator, and pay more attention to the needs of the specialized profession with its entry level needs, *effectively ignoring and marginalizing the students interested in a broad-based interdisciplinary design education.*

Places like the School of Design, with its great potential for holistic undergraduate education that could really make a difference in the future, become just that: places with great potential. The wasted opportunities accumulate year after year.

Inside the graphic design sector of the school, the student never learns to see a client's need for such things as shopping bags as an interpretation of a problem, involving complex cause and effect relationships between many factors; rather, they see the client's need as an answer in search of a visual form. The student designer is trained to see the need as the problem in and of itself. Ignoring the cyclical cause and effect relationships of the world from a holistic point of view, the designer becomes just as much of a tool as the computer he or she sits in front of.

By staying inside their respective departments, students begin to build up a false sense of confidence because they basically do the same projects over and over again. By not venturing out of the safe confines of their department, students surround themselves with a collective blanket of security, decreasing the chance that their self-image will be challenged. They go unchecked because everything is separated; they cannot test their beliefs because their beliefs become ends in themselves, rules to be followed without any grounding in self-criticism or holistic thinking. They don't see what they are doing because they look at situations from the perspective of one on the inside looking out. They never learn to look from the outside in.

And we all like it this way because it is so safe and comforting. Isn't it great when we only have to answer to ourselves, and the only disagreements are on things like style?

#### **Is there an educational alternative?**

Could teachers transcend their authoritarian model of structuring classes and stop worrying about evaluating students? Could they instead instill in their students a sense of empowerment instead of dependency? Basically, could teachers begin to see schools as services to students and society at large, rather than a specialization factory and a way to create entry-level employees who know how to follow orders?

Could we as students transcend our passive way of posturing as learners, and begin to take on responsibilities on our own without being told to? Could we initiate activities, rather than just take orders? Could we challenge our elders and the curriculum when we don't agree, rather than just complaining about it when no one is around? Do students really need to be graded on how they can make a shopping bag look pretty?

To embrace a dialogue between student and teacher, designer and client, designer and audience, designer and public, would bring debate and discussion to the situation, bring us closer to the meaning of a democratic community and a chance to actually communicate. It would bring a sense of relation to the world and social setting at large. It would force us to tear down the those barriers that we put up that enable us to see ourselves on the inside and others on the outside. The links between private and public interests would be exposed. This situation would give purpose to the designers' action and force them to become more than the mere deliverers of goods. We would become responsible creatures, responsible for the idea and origins of our activities, responsible for producing these artifacts and for their consequences in their public sphere. By considering the public interest, with all of its complexities, and holding a dialogue of interaction, the designer could eventually begin to work on real problems and the roots that they stem from, and not just the immediate, physical need for "things."

This democratic approach to education and design would generate a cycle of activity, a sense of continuum and causality, and one situation would spin off another, resulting in yet further situations for further discourse as we work towards the roots of problems. We could build a cycle of activities in the same way that we build up a body of knowledge, except that rather than involving a single individual, it would naturally expand to force/bring individuals together, and true learning and problem-solving could have free rein.

One of the recent buzzwords has been socially responsible design. But how do today's schools expect to produce socially responsible designers if students are not even responsible for charting their own way through college? The coddling and condescending role a narrow curriculum plays says to the students: "Here, let me lead the way for you, we know what is best, you are far too ignorant to take responsibility for yourself." This often produces a dependent graduate who has not even learned to be a responsible student, much less a responsible designer.

It seems to me students should be allowed/forced to take responsibility for their own individual curriculum, whatever routes they may choose. Departments within design schools should be seen as resources for students, not compartments to contain them. Students could begin to make more demands on their schools because they would have more power over the circumstances of their own education. The schools would be forced to broaden and diversify to meet students' desires, rather than squeezing students into the current mold. Only when students have learned to become responsible students, something they must learn on their own, can we then hope to have graduates who will be responsible designers and citizens.

Perhaps the only way schools will change is from pressure brought on by students, who happen to make up the largest part of a school's population. The only way curricula will stop being tools of control and dogma is if students learn to stand up to authority. When students realize how much power there is in their numbers, schools will finally change for the better. Until students learn this, they have to be content following a dictated curriculum, and learning how to "play the game."

Until then, education will continue to be about indoctrination; interdisciplinary approaches will be talked about in magazine articles but rarely used, socially responsible design will be more of an exception than a rule, and graphic design will be more about style than solving problems.

But at least our shopping bags will look pretty.



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